The meaning and significance of sibling and peer relationships for young people looked after on behalf of local authorities

by

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Illustrations and Tables

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Declaration

The thesis and the research on which it is based are the sole work of the author.

The thesis has not been submitted for a degree at another university.

The research has been undertaken in accordance with University safety policy
and Guidelines on Ethical Practice.

Abstract

This thesis explores the meaning and significance of sibling and peer relationships for young people looked after by local authorities, from their own perspectives. A sociological approach to research with young people is employed, drawing on additional post structural and feminist insights. It is argued that hegemonic ideas concerning the nature of development have resulted in a concentration on adult and adult-child relationships, from adult perspectives. Accordingly, children's perspectives on the contribution of their interrelationships to their well-being, support networks, and sense of social inclusion have not been adequately theorised. It is concluded that this has had particular implications for looked after children, as the process of becoming and remaining looked after can result in considerable losses within their sibling and peer relationships.

A participatory methodology was developed in order to address issues of power, agency and choice within the research process. Qualitative interviews were undertaken with eighteen young people, aged between twelve and nineteen, who were, or had previously been, looked after. Sibling and peer relationships were found to make significant contributions to the young people's emotional and physical well-being, and sense of individual and familial identity, as well as providing emotional and practical support into adulthood. Accordingly, the loss of significant relationships, particularly those with siblings, could affect them deeply.

While living in care, the young people were often optimistic about the ease of negotiating relationships with siblings and friends after leaving care. However, in reality, living independently could amplify problems within sibling and peer relationships, placing young people at risk of homelessness, violence, and social isolation.

This thesis contributes greater understanding of the importance of a wide variety of sibling and peer relationships to the lives of looked after children, from their own perspectives. It also informs as to the complex challenges they face both during and after leaving care in negotiating their sibling and peer relationships in the interests of their emotional and physical well-being.

Chapter One
Introduction

This thesis investigates the meaning and significance of sibling and peer relationships for looked after children, from their own perspectives. The thesis draws on a qualitative, participatory study, based on the views and experiences of young people aged between twelve and nineteen, who are either currently or have been previously looked after by or on behalf of local authorities. It was carried out within a methodological framework characterised by the participation of children and the privileging of their accounts (James and James 2008). Young people were also engaged as consultants to the research process through the use of focus groups (Linhorst 2002).

The study was carried out within a sociological, post structural framework, which was further informed by feminist and anti-oppressive approaches. This standpoint centralises children's perspectives on their relationships, by foregrounding their accounts rather than those of adults, and allows for discussion of the interplay between power, oppression and agency.

The thesis is also informed by theoretical knowledge bases concerning relationships, and looked after children. Relationships are important in terms of identity and well-being, and can play a significant role in terms of support and social inclusion (Belot 2009). Such understanding has been well theorised in relation to both relationships between adults (Belot 2009), and those between adults and children (Noack and Buhl 2004, Ermisch 2009). However, less attention has been paid to the significance of relationships between children, least of all from their own perspectives.

While many children may experience change or loss within their sibling and peer relationships during childhood (Sanders 2004), those who are looked after are likely to experience the process of coming into and remaining in care as one which irreversibly alters the nature and pattern of their relationships with their siblings and peers (Beckett

2002). This thesis examines the ways in which looked after children give meaning to their relationships with each other, in the context of multiple changes and losses. Becoming looked after can mean immediate separation from siblings and peers (Timms and Thoburn 2003, Gilligan 2009). While being looked after, existing relationships may be altered or lost due to separation (Sinclair *et al.* 2005), and new relationships may be difficult to maintain (Gilligan 2009). When young people cease being looked after, they are likely to experience further challenges within their relationships (Broad 2005), at a time when they most need support.

Despite increased consultation with looked after children which demonstrates the significance of their sibling and peer relationships (Brannen and Heptinstall 2003, Timms and Thoburn 2003, Beek and Schofield 2004, Children's Rights Director for England 2009a,b,c,d), this continues to be an under-researched area. *[The latter citation will be abbreviated to Children's Rights Director elsewhere in the thesis].* This thesis aims to contribute to existing research in order to clarify the significance of such relationships for children and young people in maintaining identity and well-being, providing support, and attaining social inclusion both during and after leaving the looked after system.

Explanation of terms used

Most terminology used to refer to children is age-related, thereby categorising them as non-adults, and further reinforcing their status as 'becoming' adults, rather than 'being' children (Jenks 2005). Reflecting current societal norms, it is also deemed appropriate for adults to refer to older children as young people, while younger children are homogenised under the term 'child'. The use of terms is further complicated in that 'young people' do not usually refer to themselves as such. It is therefore acknowledged that the terms 'child' and 'young person' are not in themselves adequate terms of use, each imposing adult-defined and restrictive definitions.

Notwithstanding these reservations, in order to achieve coherence throughout the thesis, the terms 'child' and 'children' will be predominantly used, interspersed with the term 'young people'. The latter term will also be used to refer to all study participants. This stance is intended to reflect common usage, while recognising the various positions of younger and older children, and of young adults.

The term 'looked after' refers to children and young people who are cared for by or on behalf of a local authority, either in substitute families or residential settings, both voluntarily and on the basis of Care Orders granted by the court (Bridge *et al.* 1990). Substitute families can include placements with foster, adoptive, or friends and family, carers. The terms 'care', 'care system', and 'care leavers', will also be used at times, particularly due to their common usage both by children and within research.

Voluntary arrangements refer to those made with parental agreement, in which parents retain legal responsibility for their children, whereas Care Orders refer to circumstances in which local authorities are permitted to share parental responsibility with parents via a court order (Bridge *et al.* 1990). The term 'care leavers' refers to those who have previously been looked after in the care system, and are now supported under the legal provisions and regulations for leaving care within the Children (Leaving Care) Act 2000.

Policy and practice context

At 31st March 2009 there were around 60,900 children looked after by local authorities in England and Wales (Department for Children, Schools and Families 2009a). Statistics indicate that children are now entering the care system at an older age than previously, and are remaining longer in the system (Department for Children, Schools and Families 2009a). Consequently, as older children are likely to have well established sibling and peer relationships, there is increased potential for initial disruption of such relationships, which may be cumulative the longer they remain in care.

For all children who become looked after, the process can mean immediate separation from siblings, who may be looked after elsewhere, or remain at home (Timms and Thoburn 2003, Gilligan 2009). Siblings may also be placed for adoption, with little or no provision for ongoing contact (Rushton *et al.* 2001, Padbury and Frost 2002). Entering foster care can also mean the loss or disruption of friendships, as children will move home and at times area (Padbury and Frost 2002, Timms and Thoburn 2003, Gilligan 2009), while being in care can have a stigmatising effect, making new friendships hard to develop (Gilligan 2009). In addition to managing changes in existing relationships, children may need to negotiate new ones, with new siblings born to birth parents (Sinclair *et al.* 2005), other looked after children (Farmer *et al.* 2004), or children of foster parents (Beek and Schofield 2004).

Despite continued attempts to improve the situation, concerns have persisted in relation both to the quality of life and the eventual outcomes for children looked after on a long term basis. Children who are looked after can experience multiple placement moves (Lipscombe 2006), which can often result in a negative impact on their mental health and well-being (Beck 2006). They can also encounter violence, bullying or abuse which can adversely affect their mental health by causing feelings of hatred, fear, loneliness, confusion and a sense of worthlessness (Broad 2005). Looked after children also have an increased likelihood of becoming involved in offending behaviour (Taylor 2004a, Lipscombe 2006), and often experience educational difficulties (The Prince's Trust 2002). Young care leavers can face multiple problems including poverty, homelessness and social isolation (The Prince's Trust 2002, Broad 2005, Sinclair *et al.* 2005), all of which can significantly affect their health and well-being (Broad 2005).

This thesis will consider the impact of such forms of oppression on children's sibling and peer relationships. It will also highlight where additional oppressions such as race and disability can intersect to affect particular groups of looked after children. Black and minority ethnic children, for instance, are more likely to spend longer in the care system

(Owen and Statham 2009), which may increase the negative effects on their relationships. Disabled children can experience difficulty in making their wishes known (Morris 1998), and are more likely than other children in care to identify missing siblings and friends as amongst the worst aspects of being in care (Children's Rights Director 2009c).

The study also aims to enable looked after children and young people to contribute their views on their sibling and peer relationships. In recent years, there has been increased consultation with looked after children (Children's Rights Director 2009c, Holland 2009a); however this has often constituted large-scale studies which have not been able to explore the significance of their relationships in any depth.

Theoretical context

Children who are looked after have a range of diverse relationships with their siblings and peers, all of which may contribute towards their sense of history and identity (Brannen and Heptinstall 2003), as well as enhancing their well-being and providing support (Sinclair *et al.* 2005). Therefore it is of particular importance to generate further research knowledge which contributes the perspectives of this marginalised group of children. This study does so using a methodological approach which aims to be inclusive and participatory, in order to allow looked after children to contribute as fully as possible to existing theoretical knowledge and practice debates about their lives and relationships.

These research aims are grounded in the theoretical knowledge base related to sibling and peer relationships more generally. The thesis will argue that hegemonic discourses concerning child development and attachment theory have privileged the importance of both adult relationships and adult perspectives over those of children, thus constraining knowledge and understanding of children's relationships in both theory and practice

(Taylor 2004b, Winter 2006). Where children's relationships have been theorised, this has often been in terms of their connections with adults in their lives, and the role of such adults in the promotion of their sibling and peer relationships, as well as in their development towards stable and complete adulthood (Aldgate and Jones 2006). However, where children's inter-relationships have been theorised, they have been found to be significant (Dunn 2004, Boyden and Mann 2005, Aldgate 2006, James and James 2008).

The thesis is also informed by knowledge relating to research carried out by practitioners, examining the tensions, benefits and responsibilities of researching in this way (Fuller and Petch 1995, Fox et al 2007). Practitioner knowledge is a valuable means of understanding some of the issues for participants, as well as contributing to an awareness of the need to minimise the adverse effects of the research process on them (Durham 2002). In undertaking this study I have drawn on my role as an independent social work practitioner, together with several years of prior experience in working with looked after children as a local authority employee.

Rationale

This thesis examines looked after children's perspectives on their sibling and peer relationships in the context of wider theoretical understanding about relationships, and the role of those relationships in the provision of identity, well-being, support and social inclusion. It critically evaluates a developmental paradigm which has influenced theory, policy and practice, perpetuating a focus on adult and adult-child relationships. It is argued that there is a need to inform policy and individual planning with greater knowledge about children's relationships, from their own perspectives. In relation to social work practice, limited knowledge of looked after children's sibling and peer relationships may have hindered decisions about their lives, including with whom they live, and with whom they have contact. Giving greater credence to children and young

people's accounts of friendship and sibling relationships may also enable better understanding of the importance of such relationships for children both during and after leaving care.

The study maps the extent to which children's sibling and peer relationships are sustained, altered or lost through the processes of becoming and remaining looked after. It considers the role of such relationships in the lives of children in and after leaving care. The study seeks to extend existing research with and about looked after children, to generate new knowledge on evaluating the critical importance of sibling and peer relationships for their present and future well-being. It aims to do so from their standpoint, in order to inform policy and practice in this area.

Research objectives

The main research objectives of the thesis are:

- To investigate and contextualise the meaning and significance for looked after children of their relationships with siblings and peers, from their own perspectives.
- To explore the ways in which forms of oppression affect the meaning and significance of looked after children's relationships.
- To contribute to the knowledge base of looked after children's perspectives on their relationships with siblings and peers.
- To enable looked after children to contribute to the debates about their lives.

Research questions

The following research questions were used to inform the empirical study, and were subsequently interrogated within the thesis in relation to the data provided by the young people. In order to reflect the significance of the young people's own narratives, grounded theory techniques were used to gain theoretical insights by a process of induction (Corbin and Strauss 2008).

- What importance do looked after children attach to their relationships with their siblings and peers?

- How do looked after children conceptualise these relationships in the context of their life histories?

- What understanding do looked after children have of the ways in which these relationships have been sustained, promoted, constrained or severed through the processes of being looked after?

- To what extent have looked after children felt able to express agency, either through resisting or altering adult decisions concerning their relationships with siblings and peers?

- What do looked after children view as the consequences of significant relationships with siblings and peers being altered?

- What are looked after children's future expectations regarding the continuation and the nature of significant relationships with siblings and peers, and what do they say they need in order to sustain or promote them into the future?

Methodology

The thesis as a whole and its empirical study are situated within the sociology of childhood, employing a sociological approach in order to investigate and centralise the experiences of children from their own perspectives (Mayall 2005). The theoretical and ideological framework aims to hold in balance structural and post structural enquiry into

children's relationships. A structural approach reveals the oppressions which affect children's lives: *"In a methodological sense, structuralism allows us to compare the conditions, positions and experiences of children within a range of different social, geographical and historical contexts"* (Wyness 2006: 27). Within the context of the thesis, a sociological, structural approach allows us to consider the ways in which looked after children's lives and relationships are marginalised, as well as to further their abilities to be heard.

Post structural concepts allow us to deconstruct dominant discourses about children (Wyness 2006), and in particular to consider the presence of power relations within discourse (Wendt and Boylan 2008). This allows for consideration of the ways in which children use agency to define and shape their relationships in the face of adult-led decisions. The framework also draws on feminist work which theorises the ways in which women and children have experienced similar oppressions, thus providing insights into children's experiences of marginalisation (Mullender 2006).

Nine young women and nine young men aged between twelve and nineteen were interviewed as part of the study. Participants were viewed as social actors who actively interpret their own lives (James and Prout 1997, Corsaro 2005), in an attempt to understand how they construct their social worlds and give meaning to their interactions with each other. A key concern in the study was the development of a participatory methodology (Petrie, S. *et al.* 2006, James and James 2008), which permeated all stages of the research process. The young people were approached as research participants on the basis that they had the right and the ability to comment on their own lives (Boyden and Mann 2005). Data gained from a focus group with young people was used reflexively to examine previously drafted research questions and to alter or reframe them. An additional focus group was used to discuss the dissemination of findings. Semi-structured interviews were used to facilitate exploration of the young people's experiences of entering, living in and leaving care.

Limitations

As the study's focus is on looked after children, it does not support wider conclusions being drawn about other groups of young people. The process of identifying participants was lengthy, and reliant on the permission of gatekeepers such as social workers, parents and carers, as well as the individual decisions of prospective participants. These factors governed the eventual sample, which achieved variety in terms of age and experience, but not ethnicity, as only two of the participants were of minority ethnic origin. Similarly, I was able to access two participants with learning difficulties, but no disabled participants with physical impairments. Although the study interviews and two focus groups were conducted during the space of a year, the convening of a final focus group was unachievable due to a lengthy period of suspension.

Thesis structure and chapter outline

Chapter One – Introduction

The Introduction outlines the parameters of the study, including the theoretical and conceptual perspectives drawn on. It highlights the area of knowledge to which the thesis contributes, and the rationale behind the research enquiry, thus setting the scene for an enquiry into the significance of looked after children's sibling and peer relationships. In the following two chapters the thesis sets out the major features of the theoretical, legal and policy framework within which it is set.

Chapter Two – Key themes and issues within theorising about children's relationships

This chapter examines the ways in which personal relationships, in particular those related to children and young people, have been theorised within psychological and sociological paradigms. It demonstrates that the pervasiveness of a developmental perspective has been influential across disciplines in theoretical, policy and practice spheres, affecting the ways in which children are seen and understood.

Critical studies of childhood are used to provide insights into the ways that children and their relationships have been theorised. Developmental and structural approaches to children are examined in the context of post structural and feminist discussions concerning intersecting oppressions and the dynamics of power. The role of relationships in the maintenance of individual, familial and ethnic identity, as well as their importance for social integration, the development of resilience, and the provision of support, is considered. Existing knowledge concerning children's sibling and peer relationships is highlighted. It is argued that the preoccupation with child - adult relationships, as well as with children as adults in the making, has led to the subsuming of children's relationships within an adult agenda. In focusing on the role of adults as the main providers of support to children and young people, we may have undervalued the significance of their relationships with each other.

This chapter concludes that hegemonic ideas about the nature of development have led to a concentration on both adult and adult - child relationships. Consequently the nature and significance of children's relationships have not been adequately theorised. This has particularly serious implications for looked after children, whose sibling and peer relationships can be altered or disrupted through becoming looked after.

*Chapter Three – Lives and experiences: the impact of being looked
after on children's sibling and peer relationships*

This chapter examines the main body of literature related to looked after children and young people, particularly those looked after on a long term basis, focusing on the effects of becoming and remaining looked after on their relationships with siblings and peers. It evaluates the legal and policy context pertinent to looked after children, in particular those laws and policies which have strongly influenced our approaches to them and their relationships.

The chapter argues that being looked after has a serious impact on relationships, which intensifies over time. It also considers that despite increased consultation, there is not yet sufficient knowledge regarding these relationships, from children's perspectives. This chapter explores the diverse sibling and peer relationships which looked after children may consider important, in the context of different types of placement. It also considers the challenges faced by young care leavers, and the role of their sibling and peer relationships at the point of leaving care. It concludes that young people's relationships can be significantly affected by the processes of entering and remaining in care. This establishes the need for an exploration into the meaning and significance of sibling and peer relationships for looked after children.

Prior to analysing the empirical findings of the thesis, the following chapter describes the methodology and research methods employed and identifies how they are consistent with the overall theoretical perspectives of the thesis.

Chapter Four – Theoretical and methodological approaches employed
in researching the views of looked after young people

This chapter examines the use of a qualitative, participatory methodology, employed throughout the research process, highlighting the challenges and advantages of this approach. It considers the ways in which issues of power, agency and choice were addressed, consistent with a sociological approach, combined with insights gained from feminist and post structural discussions. The role of the practitioner as researcher is discussed, together with the responsibility this engenders to approach participants in a sensitive way, and to be reflexive throughout the research process.

The following three chapters present the data analysis from the empirical study, related to participants' accounts of entering, living in, and leaving care.

Chapter Five – The significance of sibling relationships
for young people entering care

This chapter analyses participants' accounts of the process of care entry, with specific regard to its effects on their existing sibling relationships. It maps the extent to which relationships are both altered and lost through the process of entering care. It highlights young people's recollections of loss and powerlessness.

Chapter Six – The significance of sibling and peer relationships
for young people living in care

This chapter analyses participants' accounts of the effects of being looked after on their sibling and peer relationships. It maps the loss of friendships which occur as a result of placement or school moves. It acknowledges the multiple losses which occur within familial relationships, and maps the wide range of relationships which young people perceive as significant. The chapter also highlights young people's reactions of anger, grief and resignation, and considers how they give meaning to their sibling and peer relationships in the context of repeated loss and change.

Chapter Seven – The significance of sibling and peer relationships
for young people leaving care

This chapter analyses young people's accounts related to leaving care, and is addressed from two perspectives: the future expectations of those still living in care, and the experiences of those who were living independently. The differences between expectation and reality are highlighted. The significance of relationships with siblings and peers for young care leavers in the context of issues such as isolation and homelessness is discussed.

Chapter Eight – Conclusions and recommendations

This chapter synthesises the major findings of the study concerning the significance of sibling and peer relationships for looked after children, both in and after leaving care. It distils the effects of coming into and remaining in care on such relationships. It identifies the role of such relationships in the formation of identity, the maintenance of well-being and the provision of support both during and after leaving care. The chapter demonstrates the value of a critical approach to the study of children's sibling and peer relationships, and how it is essential to consider their perspectives. It also emphasises the benefits of sociological, post structural and feminist insights which allow for consideration of the nature of oppression, the dynamics of power, and children's use of agency with regard to their relationships. Drawing on the significance of the study findings, the chapter highlights areas in which further research could be beneficial, as well as addressing recommendations for policy and practice regarding looked after children and care leavers' sibling and peer relationships.

Chapter Two

Key themes and issues within theorising about children's relationships

Introduction

Chapter One established the focus of the thesis as the exploration of the significance of sibling and peer relationships within the lives of children and young people who are looked after. This chapter engages with the broader research context arising from the extensive literature on children's relationships, and the ways in which they have been theorised within a number of disciplines. An evaluation of the literature demonstrates that key themes and issues may have limited understanding of the importance of children's inter-relationships, particularly from their own perspectives. They may also have limited awareness of the contribution of such relationships to children's well-being, and to their sense of personal, familial and ethnic identity. Finally, they may have restricted knowledge concerning children's use of agency (by making their own decisions or resisting those made by adults) in response to the impact of complex oppressions.

In this chapter it will be argued that until relatively recently both the theoretical and research literature concerning children's relationships has been characterised by particular approaches to understanding children's development. A highly influential theme has been the prominence given to the child's attachment to one significant adult (usually the mother) as the key factor in the process of becoming a stable and well adjusted adult. The background to this has been the preoccupation in theory with children's development into adults, resulting in less attention to their existing relationships and capabilities in their lives as children. Ideas about children's development have also been seen to be universally applicable, which has influenced the research field by limiting the inclusion of significant factors which contribute to adversity and social circumstance. Additionally, research into the nature and significance of

relationships has often been focused on child-adult relationships, from an adult perspective, rather than on children's relationships from their perspectives. Although awareness of the role of siblings and peers in children's development has grown in recent years, dominant understandings about child development which have filtered through from theory to policy and practice continue to influence child welfare and educational policies, as well as social work practices, both in general and in relation to looked after children.

Over recent years several critical approaches to the study of relationships and to child development have opened up new avenues for theory and research concerning children's lives. These approaches derive from the sociology of childhood, critical childhood studies, social psychology, feminism and post structuralism; and ideas from within these disciplines have served to challenge prevailing adult-centric and universally applicable approaches to child development, and have been instrumental in the exploration of the social construction of children and childhood. There have been important developments in theorising concerning the nature and significance of attachments. There has also been a growing consideration of the value of relationships between children, as well as recognition that they may make a significant contribution to children's health and well-being both now and in the future. Such cross-paradigmatic developments are ongoing, and are of direct relevance to an increased understanding of the lives and experiences of looked after children, as well as identifying new areas which would benefit from further theorising and research. They may also contribute to future changes of a legal, policy, and practice nature within the child welfare field.

This chapter will critically evaluate the ways in which children's personal relationships have been theorised within psychological and sociological disciplines. It will explore the ways in which specific ideas about children, attachment and child development have influenced theory and research concerning children's relationships, as well as legal and policy frameworks for child welfare, and childcare policy and practice. It will be argued

that it is imperative to engage with theoretical understandings of children's current, rather than future, lives. The analysis will sit within a conceptual framework created by the sociology of childhood and critical childhood studies. It will also draw on feminist and post structural perspectives which have centralised an analysis of discourses relating to patriarchy, power and agency, within the study and understanding of personal relationships. The chapter will also evaluate the research which does exist concerning children's perspectives on relationships with siblings and peers, establishing what is currently known about their significance. Conclusions will be drawn as to the contributions of such relationships to children's mental well-being, support networks and sense of social inclusion, both currently and in the future. It will be argued that whilst the marginalisation of the significance of children's relationships with each other is important for all children, it may have had particular implications for those children who are looked after, due to the changes and losses they are particularly likely to have experienced within their relationships.

Developmentalism – a hegemonic paradigm

Within a developmental paradigm, some ideas about children's development, and the nature of their attachments, have become particularly influential in terms of the ways in which children and their circumstances are understood. Children have been seen in terms of developmental stages (Jenks 2005), and their development has been particularly theorised in relation to their attachments to significant adults (Bowlby 1973). Ideas about children's development have also been seen as universally applicable, resulting in normative assumptions about the needs and experiences of children. Developmental ideas have significantly influenced the research field, and have to an extent become embedded in policy and practice related to child welfare. This has had particular ramifications (discussed in detail in Chapter Three) for children whose relationships can be compromised by the process of becoming and remaining looked after.

The following account of the influence of a developmental paradigm will firstly address theoretical approaches to children's development, following this with a discussion of attachments between adults and children, and the prominence of both these themes within policy and practice. It will also consider more recent ideas which have begun to open up discussion of wider influences on children's development. Finally, it will address the neglect of the importance of children's views which has resulted from the influence of developmental ideas.

Children as developing beings

Developmental psychology grew from long-established traditions of the study of childhood, which concluded that children needed to take on certain cultural ideas in order to 'develop' into fully formed adults:

> *"Out of the early Puritan conception of children as conceptually 'other', as being different from adults and therefore in need of rigorous cultural training, grew the notion that such differences were fundamental to the biological, rather than sociological, condition of childhood. Children's difference from adults simply reflected children's developmental lack."* (James and Prout 1996: 43).

Subsequently, constructions of children within developmental psychology have continued to focus on their future capabilities, and the processes by which they become fully functioning adults. Hence child development *"operates with a 'deficit model' in relation to children, concentrating attention on their limitations and lack of competence ..."* (Taylor 2004: 229). This attention to the developing, incomplete child has prevented us from fully appreciating the richness and depth of children's current capabilities:

> *"Developmental psychology remains future-oriented; it wants to know how small people become big people."* (Mayall 2005: 132).

A developmental approach has been particularly exemplified in the work of Piaget (1972) (translation), whose understanding of the staged development of children has

been deeply influential. Piaget continues to be a popular reference point in research and child care related texts (Bailey 2006, Schofield 2006, Grieg *et al.* 2007). Aspects of a Piagetian approach are useful; for instance a framework of normative stages, while now recognised to be artificial, can provide professionals with a means of assessing a child's situation and the nature of any influences on them (Rose *et al.* 2006). This is particularly pertinent with regard to looked after children, whose development is likely to be impaired due to external factors. Nevertheless, Piaget's future focus is detrimental to our understanding and therefore our treatment of children's current lives and relationships. His conceptual model of stage-related scientific knowledge acquisition does not allow for consideration either of children's individual abilities, or of their use of personal resources in dealing with situations.

Conceptual ideas about children's development have been carried forward through the work of theorists such as Bandura (1977) and Vygotsky (1978) (translation - see also in Rieber (1998)), who both emphasised aspects of social context as an influence on learning, moving away from a stage-like approach towards an emphasis on social learning as the key driver for development. Bandura's theory of social learning considered the continuous interaction between cognition, behaviour and environmental factors (Bandura 1977). Vygotsky (1978) (translation - see also in Rieber (1998)) emphasised the importance of interaction with other children in learning, yet his ideas are noticeably absent in social work text books relating to children (Taylor 2004b). Such initial theorising opened up the field, allowing consideration of broader social influences on children's development, such as other children, parents, school and community. This was reflected in ecological theory as developed by Bronfenbrenner (1979), as a means of examining the external influences on children's development, and subsequently influenced the Framework for the Assessment of Children in Need and their Families (Department of Health 2000a), used by social workers as a means of assessing children's needs and development. The conceptualisation of children as developing

beings has continued to influence the research field, in terms of the connections between children's sibling and peer relationships and their development (Bagwell 2004, Dunn 2004, Bedford and Volling 2004, Sanders 2004). In addition, ecological theory has been extended in the form of a developmental-ecological perspective on children's development (Aldgate 2006), which allows for greater exploration of external influences including siblings and peers on children's development. This will be considered in detail within the discussion of developmental influences on policy and practice.

Developmental theories also have a tendency to promote universal ideas about children's development. Both Piaget and Vygotsky, for instance, have been criticised for presenting development as scientific and identical in every individual (Burman 2008). Developmental theories often refer to 'the child' and 'the family', thus defining children's developmental needs as universal and as able to be understood across time and culture. Accordingly concepts of children and childhood are rarely contextualised (Taylor 2004). Despite children's differences in terms of factors such as social class, ethnicity and gender, there is still a tendency to regard them as a universal category (Jenks 2004), which risks minimising research attention to some groups of children who have experienced considerable adversity, such as those who are looked after.

Children's attachments to adults

Theoretical ideas about children's development have also resulted in a preoccupation with the attachment relationship between the primary adult care-giver and the child, and its role in promoting the child's transformation into a stable, secure adult. Key ideas in the area of attachment theory emerged from the foundational work of S. Freud (Freud, A 1986) on relationships, and have gone on to influence child care theory and practice, in particular the development of attachment theory as a means of understanding children's relationships. Ideas concerning attachment were introduced and popularised by Bowlby (1973,1988), who emphasised the critical importance of the very early days in which

young children form attachments to their key caretakers, as well as the adverse consequences which could result from the failure of such early attachments:

"... anxious attachment develops ... because his [the child's] experiences have led him to build a model of an attachment figure who is likely to be inaccessible and/or unresponsive to him when he desires her." (Bowlby 1973: 261).

Bowlby's work on attachment theory continues to provide fundamental understanding concerning children's behaviour in response to fear or anxiety (Aldgate and Jones 2006). His ideas have subsequently been taken forward by theorists in the area of social work with children and families (Howe 2005, Aldgate and Jones 2006, Aldgate 2007), who have articulated serious concerns as to the consequences for children when attachments are inadequate or disrupted.

Socio-genealogical connectedness (Owusu-Bempah 2006, see also Owusu-Bempah 1995) is also highly relevant to extending ideas about attachment theory, as it emphasises the importance for separated children of maintaining knowledge based connections to birth parents.

Howe's work (2005) has demonstrated the essential nature of positive attachments between looked after children and their carers, whereby children receive reassurance and protection vital to their emotional and physical well-being. He has also drawn attention to the severe impact of psychological and developmental delay where such attachments are not formed. In particular, he has identified the high risk of such problems for looked after children, who may have experienced unreliable early attachments, followed by separation from those attachment figures. This aspect of Howe's work has helped to take forward understanding of the significance of attachments for looked after children.

However, a major drawback of attachment theory is that it results in a concentration on the relationships between adults and children, at the expense of those between

children. Consequently theory is driven by research concerning the need for a secure attachment relationship between the child and their main carer. This focus on attachments between adults and children has resulted in less attention being paid to the value of sibling and peer relationships for children's well-being.

Although attachment theory has been primarily concerned with the relationships between adult caregivers and children, nevertheless theorists have continued to explore the nature of attachments between other adults and children, and between children themselves. It has been recognised that attachment relationships are not confined to that between mother and child (Aldgate and Jones 2006, Aldgate 2007). Furthermore, secure attachments between children and adults are also now believed to impact on a child's ability to make and maintain positive relationships with their siblings and peers (Bedford and Volling 2004, Aldgate and Jones 2006, Howe 2010):

> *"The more securely attached child is likely to have more harmonious sibling relationships and have good relationships with friends, and make more friends in middle childhood ..."* (Aldgate and Jones 2006: 81).

Sibling relationships have also been found to be protective for children in situations where they have encountered stressful life events (Gass *et al.* 2007). Theorising of this nature has revealed the need to consider new ways of viewing attachments, which acknowledge the existence of multiple attachments within children's lives (Aldgate and Jones 2006), including those between children.

Developmental ideas reflected in policy and practice

A developmental perspective on children has strongly influenced policy and practice in the area of child welfare. Within the Children Act 1989, children's needs are interpreted in terms of their development, with a concentration on their developing health and capabilities. Professionals are also required to take account of children's age and understanding when making decisions regarding their needs and welfare, which limits

the value placed on children's own interpretation of their needs. Similar emphasis on the limitation of children's abilities can be found in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations General Assembly 1989). The United Kingdom (having ratified the Convention in 1991) is required by law to recognise the rights of children detailed within it. However the exercise of those rights is limited and subject to interpretation. Article 12, for instance, recognises children's rights to express their views, however this is tempered by the requirement to have regard to their *'age and maturity'* (United Nations General Assembly 1989: 12 (1)).

Concerns with children's development have become increasingly evident in policy over recent years. The *Every Child Matters* Green Paper (Department for Education and Skills 2003) was born out of particular concerns about the development of some children, including those who were looked after, and their failure to achieve the most basic outcomes. It drew attention to the fact that despite a degree of improvement, some children continued to experience poor outcomes in relation to education, and were still at a high risk of offending, poor health, and teenage parenthood. For the first time, there was significant concern as to the impact of social exclusion on children in general, as well as a continued focus on the need to improve the life chances of looked after children.

Every Child Matters – Change for Children (Department for Education and Skills 2004a) became the national strategy for local change, supported by the strategic reforms generated by the implementation of the Children Act 2004. It set out aims for the achievement of the five outcome measures for all children, defined as being healthy, staying safe, enjoying and achieving, making a positive contribution, and achieving economic well-being. The government stated its intention to both *"improve those outcomes for all children and to narrow the gap in outcomes between those who do well and those who do not"* (Department for Education and Skills 2004a: 4).

The use of outcomes as a way of measuring children's progress has its difficulties. It has the potential to reinforce a universal approach to children's development which does not take account of cultural specificity or individual differences between children. In reality, the achievement of outcomes may be different for children according to their needs and circumstances. For disabled children, for instance, there may be different levels of achievement, or different priorities given to aspirations (Sloper *et al.* 2009). Better outcomes can only be planned if practitioners understand the diverse nature of looked after children's needs and experiences, and appreciate that steps towards achieving outcomes may also be small and not always measurable (Ward *et al.* 2005).

However, although the five outcomes (concerning health, safety, achievement, positive contributions and economic well-being) have some limitations as a means of measuring children's progress, they do at least go some way towards recognising the social aspects which impact on children's lives, and have been instrumental in highlighting longstanding concerns, that children and young people who are looked after have many more social challenges to contend with than children in the general population:

> *"... the dimensions of gender, ethnicity, disability, sexuality and socio-economic status, alongside the particular and specific care experiences, are crucial to understanding the care experience. We need to place debates about the care system in a wider context of debates about difference and diversity."*
> (Frost and Parton 2009: 111).

Themes of development are also evident with regard to the assessment of children in need. The *Framework for the Assessment of Children in Need and their Families* (Department of Health 2000a), illustrated schematically on the following page, has been designed for the purpose of assessing children's development (Department of Health 2000a: 10), and does so through the three foci of parenting capacity, the child's developmental needs, and family and environmental factors:

Health   Basic Care

Education

Emotional &
Behavioural
Development

Ensuring
Safety

Emotional
Warmth

Identity

CHILD
Safeguarding
and promoting
welfare

Stimulation

Family
& Social
Relationships

Social
Presentation

Guidance
& Boundaries

Selfcare Skills   FAMILY & ENVIRONMENTAL FACTORS   Stability

CHILD'S DEVELOPMENTAL NEEDS

PARENTING CAPACITY

Community Resources
Family's Social Integration
Income
Employment
Housing
Wider Family
Family History & Functioning

Fig. 1. The Assessment Framework (Department of Health 2000a: 17)

Although the Assessment Framework acknowledges the importance of children's

relationships, siblings and peers are subsumed within family and social relationships,

thus minimising their importance. Additionally, they remain couched in terms of their

significance for development, and therefore only of their future, not their current, well-

being. Consequently there are limited opportunities for practitioners to evaluate the

nature and the value of such relationships in children's lives at the point of assessment.

The limited attention to sibling and peer relationships within the Assessment Framework

has also meant that they cannot be adequately acknowledged as to their role in

promoting social inclusion for children. The use of Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological

theory within the Assessment Framework (referred to previously), goes some way

towards acknowledging the effects of external influences on children's development,

however this is only in terms of general family and environmental factors. The

Assessment Framework refers to the importance of the family's overall social

integration, rather than specifically considering the role of children's relationships with

each other in promoting social inclusion. This is not sufficient to encompass the complexities of children's lives, and in particular the place of relationships with other children within their lives. There is still a need for a more informed, anti-oppressive approach to relationships, which considers the role of sibling and peer relationships in promoting the social inclusion of some of the most disadvantaged children in society.

Nevertheless, an important contribution in this area has been made by the developmental-ecological model of child development (Aldgate 2006), which encompasses emerging ideas about the wider nature of influences on children's development. Aldgate's (2006) work has recognised that children's development can be influenced by both internal and external factors, including their interactions with other people, and has therefore been particularly useful in elevating the importance of siblings and peers for children in this regard:

> *"The idea that parents are directly and primarily to be held solely responsible for their children's development is now increasingly seen as too simplistic. Children are capable of forming multiple relationships. Fathers, siblings, extended family and peers will all influence a child's development from an early age ..."*
> (Aldgate 2006: 27).

A developmental-ecological model recognises that children's development varies between individuals, highlighting the importance of cultural diversity in children's relationship to their environment, as well as the idea that the *"... positive ecology of their environment"* (Aldgate: 2006: 33) will have a bearing on their recovery from negative experiences and abuse. This approach to children's development therefore assists in opening up discussion about the individual, cultural and environmental factors which can affect the lives and relationships of looked after children. It also allows us to consider the potential benefits of positive relationships with siblings and peers in children's development.

Attachment theory in policy and practice

Prevalent in theory, ideas about attachment have also continued to exert influence within policy and practice contexts related to child welfare. The relationship between parent and child is emphasised in key legislation such as the Children Act 1989, where the court is required to consider the capability of parents to meet children's needs. The Quality Protects initiative (Department of Health 1998) also highlights the importance of children being securely attached to their carers, as a major government objective. This message is reinforced in the form of a primary government objective: *"To ensure that children are securely attached to carers capable of providing safe and effective care for the duration of childhood"* (Department of Health 1999: 2). More recently, it can be seen that the five outcome measures for children within the Every Child Matters policy agenda (previously discussed) have been developed in the context of parental involvement. Successful outcomes for children are linked to parental involvement; for instance parents, carers and families are to *"promote healthy choices"* (Department for Education and Skills 2004a: 9) in order to help children achieve the outcome of being healthy. Sure Start programmes similarly connect the well-being of children with the support of parents in their role (Department for Education and Skills 2005).

Within the Every Child Matters programme, ideas about the importance of attachment feature most prominently in relation to looked after children. *Care Matters: Time for Change* (Department for Education and Skills 2007) refers to the need for children to be securely attached to a carer, usually a parent. Here also the two themes of attachment and development come together: *"This secure relationship, or 'attachment', with consistent carers is essential to their [children's] development ..."* (Department for Education and Skills 2007: 18). Additionally, children's attachment to adults is linked directly to resilience, which is seen to be achieved through strong connections with parents, and strong bonds with adults. The role of peers is only briefly acknowledged

within this document, and does not allow for any comprehensive consideration of the role of siblings or peers in the formation of resilience for looked after children.

Attachment theory features prominently in policy related to children, to the extent that it has been argued that attachment has been used as justification for a range of central government policies (Aldgate 2007):

> *"The importance of children being 'attached' to families has been used to justify a range of policies from family support to permanency planning for adoption."*
> (Aldgate 2007: 57).

Adoption policy is underpinned by an emphasis on the importance of providing children with stability and security in the form of permanent attachments (Schofield *et al.* 2007). Consequently, as will be demonstrated in Chapter Three, it has achieved prominence as a means of achieving permanence for looked after children, and has often resulted in the severing of sibling relationships (Sayer 2008).

Ideas about the centrality of attachment have also been reinforced in practice, within the Assessment Framework (Department of Health 2000a). One third of the overall assessment is based on the ability of parents to provide care, protection and stability, with particular emphasis on the attachment relationship in terms of the requirement of parents to provide emotional warmth (Aldgate 2007). The current assessment framework has been revised in an attempt to capture different theoretical ideas of development; however it continues to reinforce the idea that what is important for children is one significant adult relationship, whether that be with a parent, carer, adopter or mentor. Attachment theory has achieved prominence in policy and practice discussions about looked after children, and its emphasis on the adult-child relationship has hindered discussion about the importance of other relationships in the lives of children, especially those with siblings and peers.

Neglecting the importance of children's views

A developmental perspective on children's lives has further resulted in a neglect of the importance of children's own views of what fosters their emotional well-being. Despite the emergence of new ideas concerning the complex nature of children's relationships, ideas about attachment remain prevalent in theory, and have filtered through into research in the area, resulting in insufficient focus on the role of children's relationships with each other in the maintenance of their well-being. Sociological research has been more concerned with vertical ties between parents and children, than with lateral ties with siblings or friends (Mauthner 2005).

There has been a large preoccupation in the literature with relationships between children and adults, and enquiry has tended to be directed towards the views of adults rather than those of children. This can be illustrated by the body of literature concerning adult perspectives on the nature and quality of care for looked after children. These have included studies based on the construction of an effective model of foster care (Wilson *et al.* 2003), the examination of care pathways (Schofield *et al.* 2007), and the resilience of young people in long term foster care (Schofield and Beek 2005). Studies have consulted foster carers about the nature of permanent placements, including ascertaining their opinions on how looked after children might feel (Schofield and Ward 2008). They have also consulted adults about their childhood experiences of foster care (Schofield 2003), and practitioners about working with children and planning in long term foster care (Schofield and Ward 2008). Several other studies have had as their primary focus the nature and quality of care, investigated through the views of carers and practitioners (Walker *et al.* 2002, Farmer *et al.* 2004, Petrie, P. *et al.* 2006). These latter studies, whilst including limited consultation of young people, tend to have a broad remit, and so do not explore children's relationships in great detail.

Structural and post structural alternatives to a developmental paradigm

The preceding account of a developmental paradigm has demonstrated that children's development has been theorised predominantly in terms of their future rather than their current well-being. Their development has also been mainly theorised in terms of their relationships with adults, rather than those with other children. In addition, ideas about children's development have been seen to be universally applicable, without reference to cultural or value based differences. Such influential ideas have resulted in a major focus within research, policy and practice, on children's development into future adults, and especially on the role of adults in promoting this process. Consequently, less attention has been paid to the importance of children's relationships with each other for their current as well as future well-being, least of all from their own perspectives. It has also resulted in less attention within research to groups of children affected by social disadvantage, such as those looked after by local authorities.

Looking at concepts of development in a different way allows us to begin a wholly different enquiry into children's relationships. Acknowledging the limitations of a developmental paradigm allows for consideration of the meaning and significance of children's relationships with each other as well as with adults. A sociological rather than a psychological perspective on looked after children recognises the importance of considering their views on their current relationships with siblings and peers, as well as the significance of such relationships for their current well-being. It positions them within the social structure, allowing for their marginal and provisional status (as children awaiting adulthood) to be challenged (Wyness 2006). This thesis uses a structural approach in order to highlight the inequalities which impact on the lives and therefore the relationships of looked after children. However, it is also vital to go beyond structural explanations in order to consider how children respond to adult power and decision making which affects their relationships, by resisting or altering adult decisions. Therefore the ensuing discussion will negotiate a path through the tensions which exist

between structural and post structural ways of theorising children's relationships with each other. The resulting framework will demonstrate the contribution of both critical studies of childhood and post structural insights, to understanding knowledge about children and how it has been applied. It will take a different approach to concepts of development, which will be of particular relevance to furthering understanding of looked after children, whose marginalisation as children is exacerbated by the impact of entering and remaining in care.

Valuing children's current lives

During recent years, theorists writing within critical studies of childhood have begun to argue that developmental approaches to children have resulted in their being seen predominantly as future adults rather than as existing children (Archard 2005, Jenks 2005, Prout and James 2005):

> *"Developmental psychology is wholly predicated on the notion of childhood's 'naturalness' and on the necessity, normality and desirability of development and constructive change through 'growth'. Children are thus routinely constructed as partially rational, that is, in the process of becoming-rational."* (Jenks 2005: 4).

Paradigmatic ideas from these studies have problematised the developmental view of childhood as merely the site for natural and necessary change into rational adulthood (Archard 2005, Prout and James 2005):

> *"... childhood is spoken about as: a 'becoming'; as a tabula rasa; as laying down the foundations; as shaping the individual; taking on; growing up; preparation; inadequacy; inexperience; immaturity, and so on."* (Jenks 2005: 36).

Sociologists argue that in its reduction to a state of 'becoming', childhood becomes a stage to be merely passed through, rather than one to be validated. Children are reduced to a blank slate to be formed according to adult choosing (Archard 2005).

New critical approaches to studying children recognise that a focus on adulthood does not accord respect to children's present or future as children (Loreman 2009). They allow for the production of new theoretical understandings, in which children are valued for who they are, not just who they will become (Corsaro 2005). Consequently there is a new imperative, to value children's current lives and experiences, and to give credence to their perspectives. Children must (at the very least) be allowed to explain their childhoods to adults (Boyden and Mann 2005); ultimately we must privilege children's accounts of their lives above those of adults, in order to develop a child's standpoint (Mayall 2005). In this way, professional practice with children will benefit from being informed by children's perspectives.

The importance of listening to children has been acknowledged in recent policy, through the establishment of a Children's Commissioner, and a Children's Rights Director for England. The Children's Rights Director for England, whose post was created in 2002, has since been responsible for many valuable reports giving broad overviews of the views of children and young people in care. The Children's Commissioner, established as part of the Children Act 2004, was to be specifically tasked with ascertaining the views of those children who might not necessarily be heard:

> "*... the Commissioner should pay particular regard to disadvantaged children who are most vulnerable or may need extra support in making their views known. It is intended that the Commissioner will be proactive in seeking and reflecting the views of children whose voices might not otherwise be listened to.*"
>
> (Department for Education and Skills 2004b: Note 29).

The qualitative research conducted for this thesis recognises the importance of seeking the views of looked after children as a marginalised group, and the in-depth nature of the research interviews allows for a much more detailed picture of their sibling and peer relationships than can be gained through large-scale consultations.

Structural oppressions

In critiquing developmental approaches, theorists have subsequently acknowledged that the use of universal normative models of development has acted to hide the individual cultural and experiential differences between children (Lee 2005), preventing us from understanding social, temporal and historical diversity (McDonald 2009). Children's development can be affected by both individual and multiple structural oppressions, and some children, such as those who are looked after, may be especially vulnerable to discrimination through poverty, gender, ethnicity, disability and sexuality. The lives of children in care need to be considered within the context of such oppressions (Frost and Parton 2009). Poverty and lack of access to health services, for instance, are two of the main factors which can result in poor outcomes for children (Department for Education and Skills 2003). Poverty can affect children's relationships as well as their lives in general:

> *"Poverty can have a profound impact on participation, excluding children from social experiences available to other more affluent children, and encroaching on their capacity to develop and maintain satisfactory social relationships."* (Ridge 2006: 23).

Children from some ethnic minority backgrounds are less likely to achieve at school. Gendered differences affecting well-being are also evident: boys are more likely to be excluded from school than girls, whilst girls are more likely to experience problems related to self harm and eating disorders (Department for Education and Skills 2003).

Children who become and remain looked after may be particularly vulnerable to difficulties, as a combination of risk factors such as school exclusion, family breakdown and poverty can increase a child's chances of experiencing negative outcomes (Bynner 2001, Department for Education and Skills 2003). The Every Child Matters programme demonstrated heightened awareness in policy terms of the structural oppressions encountered by all children. It also highlighted serious concerns about the health,

education and well-being of looked after children, who were not achieving to the same extent as children in the general population (Department for Education and Skills 2007).

Children's use of agency

Children's presence within child welfare policy is predominantly characterised by a discourse of needs, which assumes a deficit model of childhood (Wyness 2006). Within this discourse, children are subject to adult control and positioned as less than competent until they themselves attain adulthood. Their agency is therefore restricted as a result of their minority status in society (Mayall 2005). Viewing children solely in terms of their needs also reinforces the power relations already established within the adult-child relationship. Accordingly policy constructed by adults in this way has profound effects on children's lives:

> *"... the formation of particular discourses creates contingent centres of power, which define areas of knowledge and truth claims, and frameworks of explanation and understanding. Those with power can influence language and discourse and can therefore influence the way in which life is experienced, seen and interpreted."*
> (Parton 2009: 224).

A sociological perspective on children, however, views them as social actors in their own right who are able actively to influence their own situations (James *et al.* 1998, 2005, James and James 2004). For instance, in the context of domestic violence children have sometimes attempted to develop coping strategies or have wanted to intervene and stop the violence (Mullender 2006). However an understanding of children as social actors has to be contextualised by an understanding of the restrictions which structural oppressions place on children, as well as the discourses which impact upon them. The potential of looked after children to encounter multiple oppressions may make them particularly vulnerable in this respect (Department for Education and Skills 2003).

A post structural analysis allows for better understanding of the discourses which impact upon children, by providing for the existence and interaction of multiple discourses and sets of power relations. It also allows us to deconstruct power relations and discourses, and in turn give voice to marginalised perspectives (Parton 2009) such as those of looked after children. It means acknowledging that power is not an absolute possession; rather it exists as part of the interactions between people:

> *"In line with a post-structuralist approach to the social construction of power, we treat power as relational, exercised in interaction, rather than held by an individual, and as diffuse and subject to shifts depending on context."* (Edwards *et al.* 2006: 10).

In order to understand children's use of agency, there must be an appreciation of the way in which power is exercised in interaction between children and adults in a variety of contexts and situations. Considering children's agency in these circumstances must also mean being aware of the responsibility and opportunity with which it presents us as adults:

> *"Agency does not simply liberate children. It opens up possibilities for hearing children, consulting and working with children, and creating new spaces for children's contributions ..."* (Wyness 2006: 236).

This is especially apposite in relation to looked after children, whose marginalisation may make it more difficult for them to be heard than children in the general population.

A deconstructive approach to power acknowledges 'powerful' and 'powerless' to be extremes on a continuum where many relative positions of powerfulness and powerlessness exist (Healy 2005). Children who become and remain looked after are often subject to more marginalisation than other children, and also have to contend with major changes within their sibling and peer relationships. Consequently any opportunity to exercise their ability to resist the centrality of adults in their lives by making their own decisions, or by choosing how to define the parameters and meanings of their own relationships, takes on added significance. For children and young people in such

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situations, agency may be expressed in terms of small achievements, which nevertheless have great significance for those concerned. Although power can exist along a continuum (Healy 2005), it can also be subject to flux and change as children express their views and opinions.

Post modern insights are valuable in bringing the attention of social workers to context specific experiences of power, identity and processes of change:

> *"... post-structuralists contend that power is a product of discourse rather than something that is attached to specific identities, such as 'male' or 'professional'. Thus, from this view, if we want to understand power in any context, we need to analyse how discourses operate to construct identity, knowledge and power within that specific context."* (Healy 2005: 202-3).

In terms of the lives of looked after children, this entails recognising both the structural oppressions which affect them, and the ways in which they challenge such oppressions in negotiating their sibling and peer relationships on a daily basis.

Feminist perspectives

Feminist perspectives have embodied both anti-oppressive and post structural standpoints, and are therefore able to provide such insights into the nature and the exercise of power. From an anti-oppressive stance, feminist writers have drawn parallels between women's and children's oppression, as well as highlighting women's role as adult oppressors. Feminist social work with its focus on the complexities of power and the awareness of structural factors which oppress clients can be seen as part of a wider discussion about anti-oppressive practice, in which feminist social workers have been responsible for broadening definitions of oppression beyond gender (Dominelli and McLeod 1989).

Feminism has also provided significant and valuable opportunities to talk about the nature of oppression, and the dynamics of power relations. Some of the strongest connections between women's and children's oppression have emerged from the study

of domestic violence, in which the links between domestic violence and child abuse have been established (Humphreys 2006, Mullender 2006). In this respect feminism has opened up anti-oppressive approaches specifically in terms of children's relationships with adults, recognising that children, like women, are often subject to abuse from male perpetrators of domestic violence.

However, feminist perspectives have also acknowledged that women's and children's interests are not synonymous. Although women are often dominated by men with respect to domestic violence, situations also exist where women dominate other women, or children: *"... feminist perspectives invariably forget that mothers also have different interests to those of their children and enjoy power"* (Parton and Parton 1988: 41). Women, therefore, are not solely a group with general and universal experience of oppression (Scourfield 2003), and tend to have more power than children as a result of their adult status. Consequently there are limits to the establishment of mutual oppression, as children's oppression is always affected by their relationships with adults (Wyness 2006).

Feminism, in addition to establishing the differences between the oppression of women and children, has also extended the discussion of the nature and extent of power relations. Feminism has moved forward from focusing simply on the centrality of men's power over women to recognise the differences between groups of women according to different dimensions to social disadvantage. It has been argued by feminists that factors such as racial oppression have compounded the experiences of particular groups of women (Foster-Carter 1987). Explorations of post structural perspectives have allowed feminists to move away from binary opposites such as men versus women, and powerful versus powerless (Featherstone and Fawcett 1994). Post modern ideas within feminist thought have allowed social workers to celebrate difference, and to examine complex power relationships including those between women social workers and service users (White, V. 2006).

Feminist writers have furthered crucial debates concerning the ability of children to resist structural inequalities through the use of agency. They have drawn parallels between women and children, as active agents who possess a range of diverse strengths and who can influence their own lives (Dominelli 2002), and as such they have been influential in beginning to deconstruct the nature of adult-child power relations:

"Feminists' concerns with the rights of children have focused on the significance of adultist power relations in oppressing children. These have to be deconstructed if children's voices are to be heard on a par with those of adults."

(Dominelli 2002: 163).

Indirectly, the awareness within feminist writings of women's place and voice, as well as the multiple oppressions experienced by them, offer a means of being aware of such processes within other marginalised groups. Women are affected by many social divisions, for example race, class, sexuality and disability (Dominelli and McLeod 1989). Women, like children, are affected by a variety of structural inequalities and therefore struggle to make their voices heard, although, as has been previously discussed, there are limits to the notion of shared oppression. Furthermore, post modern feminist perspectives, through considering the many and complex oppressions which can affect women's lives, have also allowed us to consider the implications of this for children. Thus such insights enable us to better understand the position of looked after children, who are disadvantaged both through being children, and through becoming looked after, and may also be further marginalised by other dimensions to social disadvantage.

Children's perspectives on the significance of their relationships

As previously argued, the importance of children's views has been largely missing in the literature concerning children's relationships, as a significant proportion of research related to children's views has been conducted from adult perspectives. However, there is a small but interesting body of literature from children, concerning what is important

within their relationships with each other. This section will consider some of the views of children within the general population on their sibling and peer relationships. This will contextualise the discussion in Chapter Three of looked after children's views on their relationships, and how they are affected by being looked after.

The relationship between siblings is often characterised by informality, and children feel able to express anger or frustration and be themselves in a way which they cannot do with friends (Punch 2008):

> *"There's no point in not being yourself because they've grown up with you and they know what you're like."* (Punch 2008: 335).

There is some evidence of gendered differences in sibling interaction, as evidenced by Edwards *et al.* (2006) who found that girl siblings tended to engage through talk, and boy siblings through activity, with gendered power relations dictating that activity was favoured in boy / girl sibling pairs. Being a sibling can mean having a close bond with other children because the relationship is seen as permanent:

> *"You know they're always going to be there, don't you, and there's someone you can rely on. It's not like [a] friend who might turn round and go, you know, 'sorry I don't like you any more', there's always the tie between you."* (Punch 2008: 339).

Children with disabled siblings often refer to normal joint activity, rather than to the implications of their disability:

> *"I play with her sometimes. She is fun having around. We don't get along with each other all the time. We argue, nag and sometimes fight. The most annoying time is when we have our breakfast when she has the whole of tomato ketchup."*
> (Stalker and Connors 2004: 225).

Children often talk positively about their disabled siblings, describing them affectionately, as well as being protective or feeling responsible towards them (Connors and Stalker 2003). Another similar study found that amongst those interviewed, all the

siblings of disabled children were concerned with the future of their disabled sibling, and some had committed to caring for their sibling permanently in the future (Burke 2004).

In research conducted with children living in poverty, older siblings have been identified as someone to confide in, and as someone who provides an element of safety when entering an area seen as risky (Hill *et al.* 2006). In other studies, older brothers and sisters have identified themselves as providing care and protection to younger siblings, whilst siblings have talked about standing up for each other outside the home environment (Edwards *et al.* 2006). Sibling groups have also been found to be important in providing a sense of identity (Edwards *et al.* 2006).

Children's and young people's accounts also illustrate the wide range of benefits which can be derived from friendships. They can provide children with emotional support, advice and help, listening, respect, caring, and can also mean someone to share secrets and have fun with (Morrow 2004). The nature of friendships can vary across gender, as evidenced by one study which found gendered differences between the accounts of boys and girls: the girls' accounts related more to individual friends than the boys, and the importance of support, trust, and being there for each other; whilst the boys accounts although also concerned with trust, were more focused on someone to keep them company and have fun with (Morrow 2004). Children can gain a major sense of belonging from friends, demonstrated by one study which found that the extent to which they liked their neighbourhood was connected to how geographically close their friends were (Morrow 2003). Children in this study who were asked to photograph important places, took photos of places they would meet friends such as parks and friends' houses. They also described living, or wanting to live in, areas where there were many friends of their own ethnicity (Morrow 2003). Children have also identified moving home or school as causing disruption to their social networks (Morrow 2004). Disabled children have been found to place particular emphasis on friendships as a means of socialising and having fun (Sloper *et al.* 2009). One study found that disabled

children valued friendships for making them feel happy; however restrictions concerning the choice and location of schools could affect friendships (Connors and Stalker 2003).

Poverty has been found to have a severe impact on children's friendships, as evidenced by one study which revealed that children found it harder to get to the places where their friends were, or to do activities with them. They also found it more difficult to afford to go on school trips, and often did not fit in because of the state of their clothes (Ridge 2006). However, friends can also play a particularly important role in the lives of children subject to poverty and social disadvantage, acting as a protective factor (Hill *et al.* 2006). Hill *et al.* found that children often kept each other safe, by going out together or by making contact to ensure a friend had returned home safely. They also found that friends made children feel good through offering reassurance and support, and that having friends in the area made it a good place to live (Hill *et al.* 2006).

Taken together these findings, drawing on children's own views, provide evidence of the important role of siblings and friends within children's lives across a range of social settings. It has been demonstrated that children value these relationships, and that they often provide care, support and protection. Siblings and peers have been seen to contribute to children and young people's sense of well-being and social inclusion, particularly where children experience discrimination or oppression. The lives and relationships of looked after children are subject to considerable adversity, and yet have been given limited attention within the research field; consequently it is of particular importance to explore their own perspectives. In doing this it may be possible to gain a greater understanding of the impact of adversity on their relationships. It may also be possible to learn more about how their relationships enable them to cope in such circumstances.

Conclusion

Hegemonic ideas from within a developmental paradigm have significantly influenced the theorising of children's relationships with each other. Psychodynamic ideas, and in particular attachment theory, have become widely used in practice with children. Ideas about attachment have become integral to a wide range of government policies relating to children, therefore placing greater importance on the nature of relationships between adult carers and children, than on the nature of those between children. This has been combined with developmental understandings about children which have theorised them as less than, and inferior to, adults. Their lives have also become regulated largely by adult views and perspectives.

A privileging of both adult relationships and adult accounts has resulted in less attention to the importance of children's relationships with each other, both for their current and future well-being. Firstly, the predominance of adult views has resulted in a lack of attention to children's perspectives on their own relationships. Therefore insufficient knowledge exists concerning the variety of relationships which children consider to be important. Secondly, the concentration on attachment theory has led to greater attention being paid to the relationship between children and adults. This has limited our awareness of the need to examine relationships between children, (particularly from a sociological perspective), and consequently their relationships have been under-theorised. Thirdly, the focus on children as adults in the making has not allowed for an appreciation of their lives and relationships as children. However, the existing literature demonstrates that children value the relationships they have with siblings and with peers, and that these relationships often contribute to a sense of well-being, social inclusion and identity.

The implications of this adult focus for the relationships of looked after children are considerable. Not only are they marginalised as children, but the particular experience

of becoming and remaining looked after is likely to cause considerable disruption in their relationships with other children. Much more needs to be known concerning the effects of being looked after on their relationships with their siblings and peers. A sociological approach allows us to privilege their views on their relationships, as children, rather than as future adults. In encompassing feminist and post structural ideas, it is also possible to engage in meaningful discussion concerning children's ability to affect and alter adult decisions on their relationships.

Having established the theoretical / ideological context in which children's relationships are understood and the consequences for child-related policy and practice generally, the next chapter will move forward to consider the implications thereof for children looked after by local authorities, both during and after leaving care. It will aim to highlight the particular issues for such children, who will often have undergone cumulative and sustained losses in their relationships. It will consider what is known about the effects of entering and remaining in care on such relationships, and the importance of these relationships, both in terms of adult knowledge, and of children's own perspectives. It will consider the implications of legislation entrenched in a developmental paradigm, and specifically the implications of such legislation for practice with this minority group of children.

Chapter Three

Lives and experiences: the impact of being looked after on children's sibling and peer relationships

Introduction

Chapter Two demonstrated that notwithstanding powerful counter-trends in the theorising of children's development and attachments to adults, children's relationships with each other can play a major part in building their sense of identity and well-being, as well as helping them to feel a sense of social inclusion and belonging. This chapter builds on such knowledge, in order to investigate evidence on the significance of sibling and peer relationships for looked after children, including their views on this. It is specifically concerned with a critical examination of such relationships for looked after children in the context of substantial change and loss, as they become and remain looked after on a long term basis. The chapter will also consider specific inequalities such as poverty, disability, racism and ageism which may increase the problems for some children. Since the point of leaving care is a time when young people often sustain further change and loss in their relationships, and may also be struggling with problems of social isolation, poverty and increased independence; the significance of sibling and peer relationships for young care leavers will also be discussed.

The chapter will first consider what is currently known about the impact of being looked after on children's sibling and peer relationships, highlighting the extent of separation and loss which occurs when children enter care and remain looked after for some time. It will also consider the support which may be provided to care leavers from their siblings and peers, in the context of considerable adversity in social circumstance. Next, the chapter will investigate the extent to which children and young people have been consulted regarding the effects of being looked after on their relationships, both in terms of historical research and recent consultation. What is known about children's views on the impact of separation and loss within their sibling and peer relationships will

be highlighted. It will be argued that greater knowledge is needed from children's own perspectives to inform policy and practice in the area. It will also be demonstrated that existing research provides continued evidence of the importance of sibling and peer relationships, although the predominantly generalised nature of investigation often limits the conclusions which can be drawn.

The chapter will then focus on the legal and policy framework related to looked after children, arguing that while considerable efforts have been made to improve the life chances of looked after children, there is still much to be done. Finally, the chapter will examine the place of practice with looked after children, and the place of longstanding as well as newer initiatives which are aimed at improving the outcomes for children. It will also examine the role within practice of foster carers, residential workers and social workers, as well as acknowledging the importance of adoptive parents. The chapter will conclude that the research evidence cited thus far illustrates the need for greater knowledge concerning the views of looked after children and young people specifically on their sibling and peer relationships, in the form of the qualitative study conducted for this thesis.

The impact of being looked after on sibling and peer relationships

Entry into care

When a child becomes looked after, there is potential for great disruption within both their familial and peer relationships, and consequently great uncertainty concerning the opportunities and support which may be needed for them to sustain relationships. Forty percent of all children who are looked after now enter care between the ages of ten and fifteen (Department for Children, Schools and Families 2009a), by which time they will have well established networks of friends and family. Children who become looked after often experience initial loss and separation from their birth family, and sometimes from siblings who may remain at home or are placed elsewhere. They can often experience

this process as one in which they are powerless to influence decisions (Schneider and Phares 2005), and dependent on adults (Mason 2008).

Losses can occur in a variety of ways; children entering care in large sibling groups are more likely to be placed separately from at least some of their siblings (Hegar 2005, Wulzcyn and Zimmerman 2005), depending on availability of placements, or what are viewed as the competing needs of children. Children who are at first placed together may not stay together, if a placement appears stable for one child but is seen not to meet the needs of another (Rushton *et al.* 2001).

Most children who are looked after have siblings either placed elsewhere (Moyers *et al.* 2006) or living with birth parents (Holland 2009b). The whereabouts of siblings is a major issue, evidenced by a recent survey of more than a thousand children in care, of whom seventy-six percent were separated from brothers and sisters living in different placements (Children's Rights Director 2009b). Coming into care, combined with moving some distance and changing schools, can also affect friendships, particularly for younger children who need adult assistance to maintain them (Gilligan 2009). A recent survey by the Children's Rights Director (2009a) found that over a third of the three hundred and seventy children consulted had lost contact with all the friends they had prior to coming into care.

Living in care

The separation and losses sustained within sibling and peer relationships as children and young people enter care are frequently amplified by long periods of time spent in care (Schofield and Beek 2005). Older children are likely to be particularly vulnerable in this respect, as those aged between ten and fifteen are tending to stay longer in the care system (Department for Children, Schools and Families 2009a). There is considerable evidence which points to the further separation of siblings after the point of entering care (Sinclair *et al.* 2005, Gilligan 2009, Children's Rights Director 2009a).

Living in care can also result in regular changes of school which increases the difficulty of maintaining established friendships (Ward *et al.* 2005). Changing placements can also mean losing contact with friends (Aldgate and McIntosh 2006). Such problems are longstanding; research conducted by Gilligan (2001) found that after long periods in care, many children no longer had contact details for family or friends; while more recently, research has indicated that the longer children are in care, the more likely they are to have less or no contact with brothers, sisters and friends (Children's Rights Director 2009a,c). Long-term effects of such losses are apparent from research with adults who were in care as children, and whose accounts often contain themes of having to manage and adapt to loss (Schofield 2003).

Multiple placements

After becoming looked after, some children experience multiple placements (Schofield and Beek 2005). In 2009 over ten percent of looked after children experienced three or more placements (Department for Children, Schools and Families 2009a). The 2009 *Children's Care Monitor* reported that the average number of placements for children consulted was four (Children's Rights Director 2009b). Children in long-stay care may have a number of moves or delays before achieving stability, including an unsuccessful rehabilitation home, a return home to a different parent than the one whom they had lived with prior to entering care, or a foster care placement pending adoption (Schofield *et al.* 2007). Where children are placed with independent care providers, either in small group residential homes or foster homes, this can result in higher than average numbers of placement moves, as well as often being geographically distant from birth families (Selwyn *et al.* 2010). One research study found that the older a child was at first placement, the greater the risk of multiple placements (Schofield and Beek 2005). The more placements children have, the more likely it is that they will undergo increased disruption in their sibling and peer relationships, which would suggest that children aged between ten and fifteen are particularly vulnerable in this respect.

Moving between placements has been found to be less about a physical change of location and more about how connections with people change as a result of the move (Unrau 2007). Moves which result in separation from siblings or friends may therefore have serious implications for children's sense of identity. Where children's mental health is stable, it may allow them to overcome challenges and construct relationships with others in a positive way. However looked after children are far more likely than their peers in the general population to have mental health problems (Meltzer *et al.* 2003, White, S. 2006), which may further impede their ability to make or sustain relationships with siblings and peers. Meltzer *et al.* (2003) found that those children with mental health problems were four times more likely than those without to say that they spent no time with friends. Problems such as these may in turn threaten placement stability, leading to potential further losses.

Loss of contact through adoption

Children whose siblings are adopted from care risk having contact terminated (Moyers *et al.* 2006), which leaves them with no prospect of finding siblings until they reach adulthood. The impact of this is demonstrated in research with adult adoptees, who felt compelled to search for siblings they had never met or did not previously know existed (Pavlovic and Mullender 1999). Research evidence on the use of Part Two of the Adoption and Contact Register since its inception, where siblings were over-represented in the sample, found that adults often felt something was missing in their lives, and spoke of their lack of rights as a sibling (Mullender and Kearn 1997). More recent research has found that adopted siblings can retain a sense of emotional connection even when they have had no contact since childhood (Ludvigsen and Parnham 2004). This latter study by Ludvigsen and Parnham (2004) also found that Barnardo's, the agency in question, had had almost as many enquiries from birth siblings as from birth mothers.

Where contact does continue for children post adoption, it tends to be at a lower level than between siblings who are all in foster care, sometimes only between one and three times a year (Schofield *et al.* 2007), and this is unlikely to include all of a child's siblings. Whilst adoptive carers may often wish to maintain contact, this may be attenuated by many factors including the actual and perceived effects on the children and the dynamics of relationships with other carers or birth parents. For some children the perceived potential risks from birth family members can result in a decision for contact to be organised on an indirect basis, such as through an exchange of letters and cards, rather than face to face. Such contact can be restrictive, however, and the need to consider more flexible methods of maintaining indirect contact between children has been highlighted (Beckett 2002).

Benefits of sibling relationships: real and symbolic

Despite the loss and change which looked after children encounter within their sibling relationships, there is some positive evidence which indicates that where either contact or a sense of connection can be maintained, this can be significant to them and can reinforce their sense of identity. There is some research which suggests that children and young people can have caring roles for each other which begin prior to care entry. Research with adults previously in care indicates that where siblings have lived together with a birth parent before becoming looked after, they may have had roles of care and responsibility, protection or comfort for each other (Schofield 2003). Young people who have younger siblings still at home have been found to feel responsible for their siblings and to worry about their well-being (Moyers *et al.* 2006, Holland 2009b). Those with new siblings born to birth parents after they have entered care have been found to worry that those siblings will experience the same parental abuse (Beckett 2002, Cairns 2004, Thoburn 2004). Whilst the experience of coming into care can affect the nature and quality of sibling interaction (Beckett 2002), this evidence suggests that sibling connections have the potential to endure over time, despite separation through being in care.

The loss of such relationships for looked after children may therefore result in a significant loss of identity. Research with young people who either were, or had previously been, looked after, has also indicated the strength of relationships which can be generated by sibling roles of care, and the distress which can be caused by their interruption (Happer *et al.* 2006). Other research evidence suggests that when sibling relationships are ended through separation, children may feel displaced (Beckett 2002). Adults who encountered such separation in childhood have looked back on the time as *"a defining moment in their childhood, when they lost faith in social workers and felt truly alone"* (Schofield 2003: 224). It is also known that adult adoptees who cared for birth siblings as children before they were adopted elsewhere can feel an immense sense of loss (Hodgkins 1999). Research with adults who were able to continue these roles when they become looked after, as the protector of younger siblings for example, has been found to be important and mutually beneficial (Schofield 2003). Where children are able to be placed with at least some of their siblings, this can help them to feel a greater sense of security (Happer *et al.* 2006). There is also some evidence to suggest that being with siblings can contribute to placement stability. Tarren-Sweeney and Hazell (2005) found that for girls, sibling placement could contribute to better mental health. An international overview of sibling placements found that in general, joint sibling placements were as or more stable than those of singly placed or separated siblings, concluding that children placed with brothers and sisters did as well or better than those placed alone (Hegar 2005).

For children who are looked after, sibling relationships can be a way of maintaining family connections where those with birth parents may be complicated by abuse, or have been severed or lost over time (Herrick and Piccus 2005, Leathers 2005). Children living in care can view spending time with siblings as just as important, or sometimes more important, than spending time with parents (Aldgate and McIntosh 2006). Sibling relationships can be supportive, born out of shared experience of

adversity (Herrick and Piccus 2005). For some children, relationships may be complicated by abusive or challenging behaviour between siblings, and separation may even be a relief (Schofield 2003). However, this does not necessarily diminish the potential significance of such relationships. Moreover, the meaning of any sibling relationship may not be solely determined by contact, but also by a sense of connection which, whether reinforced by physical contact or not, can be vital to a sense of self (Brannen and Heptinstall 2003, Rose 2006). This is particularly well illustrated by Brannen and Heptinstall (2003) in their study of family life as conceptualised by ten to twelve year olds:

> *"It was striking how much importance that foster children attached to their siblings especially since many of their siblings had been placed in other families and they rarely saw them. In some cases children had never met some of their siblings; yet they still considered them very important. It was as if siblings, more so than birth parents, symbolized the family they once had. Perhaps some siblings were of particular importance because, unlike birth parents who had often failed them, they reminded them of some positive aspects of their past family lives."*
>
> (Brannen and Heptinstall 2003: 193-4).

Placement and external settings

Researching the dynamics of children and young people's sibling and peer relationships in the context of a range of placements as well as external settings is also important as it may provide different insights. Foster placements, for example, can allow children to become part of a family (Schofield and Beek 2009), as well as being recognised as 'kin' (Schofield 2003). Children may form a variety of new relationships; with other looked after children in placement, or with birth children of carers for example. Almost half of 303 foster carers surveyed in one consultation (Children's Rights Director 2005) had their own birth children living at home. Children may even come to view themselves as siblings to unrelated children (Cairns 2004, Tarren-Sweeney and Hazell 2005). Such

relationships, and the impact of their potential loss, may be as important as those between biologically related children (Schlonsky *et al.* 2005).

Adult children of foster carers can be especially influential in promoting family membership, through accepting looked after children as their siblings, and spending time with them (Beek and Schofield 2004). Where birth children of foster carers develop sibling type relationships with children who are looked after, this can result in long lasting bonds:

> *"... I happily declare that I do have a natural brother and a natural sister along with 12 foster siblings... I worry, though, that people tick the box that says "foster family" and don't appreciate the deep permanent nature of my relationship with my acquired family. On the day I was born, I had seven siblings, and the family continued to grow, as families do. The difference was only that people didn't enter the family at age zero and didn't have as much shared genetic material."* (Cairns 2004: 190).

The development of bonds such as these has also been shown to benefit looked after young people in the form of supportive relationships as they move into adulthood (Cairns 2004). Nevertheless, it should also be remembered that where several foster children are accommodated in the same placement, this can be unsettling for children, and require them to continually make new relationships as a result of frequent changes in group membership (Maluccio and Ainsworth 2006). There is some evidence that living with other unrelated children can also be difficult, if they are bullies or violent (Children's Rights Director 2009d). Ingley and Earley (2008) recommend viewing the child as within a 'foster kinship network' in order to better understand the complexities of their relationships, including those with other children in the foster household.

Research evidence suggests that residential care may have more of an adverse impact than foster care on children's sibling and peer relationships. It has been found that children and young people living in children's homes can be more likely than those in

foster care to be separated from their brothers and sisters (Children's Rights Director 2009a). Peer relationships can be difficult to negotiate, and peer pressures, particularly in residential care, can lead to young people becoming involved in new or increased criminal activity (Taylor 2004). Young people in residential care may find it difficult to invite friends back to a residential home (Children's Rights Director 2009d), and are more likely than those in foster care to identify spending no time with friends (Meltzer *et al.* 2003). It has also been identified that young people in residential placements are far more likely than those in foster care to have mental health problems (Meltzer *et al.* 2003). This may have particular implications for Black Caribbean children and Black children of dual heritage, who are over-represented within residential placements (Owen and Statham 2009). Nonetheless, there are children for whom residential care may be more appropriate than foster care, such as those who cannot cope with the pressure of a substitute family, or a sibling group which needs to remain together (Sayer 2008).

Kinship care, in which children are cared for by family members, has become a more frequently used form of placement for children over recent years. Kinship placements can be valuable in helping children to maintain a sense of familial identity, and sometimes allow for siblings to be placed together (Hunt *et al.* 2008), although many children may still have siblings placed elsewhere (Aldgate 2009). Children may form sibling-like relationships with other related children such as cousins (Tarren-Sweeney and Hazell 2005). They may miss friends living elsewhere, although this can sometimes be compensated for by making new friends (Aldgate 2009). Kinship care may offer a means of keeping sibling groups together, although this can come at a cost, as illustrated by one study which found that kinship carers taking on sibling groups were often living in overcrowded conditions and suffering financial hardship (Farmer 2009).

Relationships and friendships may also be formed with young people through other connections such as school and college. Sometimes these connections provide a way into another family outside the looked after system, as reported by adults who were

previously in care (Schofield 2003). Indeed, the role of peers in supporting looked after children is beginning to be recognised in research. For example, a report concerned with solving problems in foster care specifically recommended that local authorities be proactive in expanding young people's support networks to include peers and friends (Padbury and Frost 2002).

The relationship between inequalities and sibling and peer relationships

In Chapter Two it was highlighted that when children become looked after, they may be at greater risk of social exclusion than some other groups of children, and that their lives need to be understood within the context of risk factors such as poverty, disability, racism and gender. It was also identified that although living in poverty could adversely affect children's abilities to maintain friendships, children's sibling and peer relationships could play an important part in the prevention of social exclusion.

The strain of living in poverty is known to have major consequences for the abilities of parents to care for their children (Family Policy Alliance 2004), and despite government measures to reduce child poverty; many children continue to live in circumstances of poverty and social disadvantage (Stewart 2009). Poverty can also have an impact on a child's ability to access leisure facilities, thus increasing their sense of social exclusion (Jack and Gill 2010). Therefore poverty is likely to amplify situations of abuse and neglect, acute stress and family dysfunction which are implicated in children's admission into care (Department for Children, Schools and Families 2009a). It will be demonstrated later in this chapter that circumstances of disadvantage existing at the time of care entry have also been found to be present in young people's lives after leaving care.

Existing research evidence demonstrates that both individually, and in combination, inequalities can have adverse affects on looked after children's sibling and peer relationships, which in turn can affect their sense of social inclusion, well-being and

identity. For some looked after children, specific inequalities such as disability or racism may also affect their abilities to maintain sibling and peer relationships. For children in such situations, relationships with siblings and peers may have added significance in terms of strengthening their sense of well-being and identity. Axford (2008) has suggested that the often temporary nature of disruption within looked after children's relationships does not inevitably result in social exclusion. However, research evidence discussed earlier in this chapter points to the overwhelming nature of disruption in relationships experienced by looked after children, which can often be permanent. Therefore it is argued that loss and change within sibling and peer relationships is likely to contribute to significant social exclusion for young people.

The impact of disability on sibling and peer relationships

According to a survey of Local Authorities in 2005, around 11,800 disabled children were looked after and receiving a service, out of an overall total of 65,900 looked after children (Department for Education and Skills 2006a). This indicates that disabled children are over-represented in the care system, as estimates for the numbers of disabled children in the overall population vary between five and eighteen percent (Read 2007). There are also two-thirds more disabled boys than girls being looked after (Department for Education and Skills 2006a). Research has revealed a number of ways in which disabled children's experiences of being looked after may have affected their relationships with siblings and peers. They can be more likely than their non-disabled peers to be placed out of the immediate area in special residential placements, thus having a greater impact on relationships over time (Morris 1998, Cousins 2006, Baker 2007). Those disabled children placed in foster care are likely to stay longer than their non-disabled peers (Baker 2007). For disabled children, the importance of contact with siblings or peers in contributing to their well-being and sense of identity may have added dimensions:

"It is never good enough to presume that a child does not comprehend the meaning of relationship and that therefore contact has no significance. On the contrary, it could be argued that only by maintaining continuity can a child with learning difficulties make sense of her world or a child with physical disabilities accept himself as he is." (Argent 1996: 2).

Problems created by long stays in care and geographical distance may be exacerbated by other challenges faced by some disabled children, in maintaining meaningful contact with siblings or friends. For instance, children with learning difficulties who find it hard to think in a conceptual way may not be able to make sense of relationships unless they have direct contact (Cousins 2006).

The impact of racism on sibling and peer relationships

Research indicates that racism, as well as other forms of oppression, may be present in some children's early lives, and may therefore be implicated in their reception into care (Barn 1993, Morris 1998). Historically, Black children of dual heritage have been received into care earlier, and remained in care longer than White children (Biehal *et al.* 1995). Black and dual heritage children continue to be looked after at approximately double their numbers in the general population, whilst Black Caribbean children and Black children of dual heritage are also more likely than White British children to experience a stay in residential care (Owen and Statham 2009). Other research has indicated that there are higher numbers of girls of Black and mixed heritage ethnic origin in care than boys, which may be connected to an increased likelihood of their running away from abusive situations (Lees 2002).

Owen and Statham (2009) suggest that wider factors may have contributed to the over-representation of Black and minority ethnic children in the looked after system, including demographic factors like poverty and family size, as well as differences in terms of care pathways. Black and minority ethnic children who become looked after have to contend

with the effects on their racial and cultural identity, as well as the impact of wider factors such as racism and poverty on their lives. Children may be separated culturally and geographically from extended family including siblings. Loss or disruption within sibling and peer relationships through entering care may make it more difficult for them to acquire the knowledge pertinent to their ethnicity and culture which might have contributed to their sense of identity. Such losses may have a long-term impact on their future mental and emotional well-being:

> *"The desire to know where I came from grew, so that when people asked me where I came from I could tell them. I wanted to know who I looked like. If I did look like someone else, was it my mum, was it my dad or even my grandparents? I wanted to know about my mannerisms, the way I walked … but most of all I wanted the other piece of the jigsaw about my heritage."* Koshi – a black woman adopted in a white family (Feast and Philpot 2003: 19).

Some young people from minority ethnic groups, such as unaccompanied asylum seekers, can encounter additional problems such as cultural and language barriers, which may prevent them from feeling settled. They may also behave in an older way as a result of their experiences and find it difficult to get on with the children of carers (Chase *et al.* 2008). This can occur in the context of an acute sense of loss through the death of family members (Chase *et al.* 2008), and feelings of guilt or worry about siblings in their country of origin (Kohli 2006). Having friends can also be a source of tension, as young people may feel unable to disclose their immigration status, or may feel that friends only contact them when they want something (Chase *et al.* 2008).

Gender patterning within sibling and peer relationships

There is a lack of detailed evidence as to the part played by gender in the relationships of looked after children, although some studies have pointed to gendered differences in looked after children's behaviours. Recent research has revealed that boys are more likely than girls to be separated from their siblings in care, although boys can be more

likely than girls to have at least monthly contact with birth siblings (Children's Rights Director 2009a). One study found that girls benefited from being placed with siblings, having better mental health than those placed alone (Tarren-Sweeney and Hazell 2005). There is also some evidence that boys are more likely to be in touch with friends from previous placements, albeit not always in close contact (Children's Rights Director 2009a). These findings point to ways in which behaviour may be patterned by gendered differences, with consequences for the maintenance of looked after children's relationships with peers and siblings.

Leaving care

Social context and the role of sibling and peer relationships

The process of leaving care is fraught with risks for vulnerable young people, and there continue to be significant numbers of young people who leave care between the ages of sixteen and eighteen (Children's Rights Director 2006, Department for Children, Schools and Families 2009a), in other words at a younger age than most leave home. The seminal study conducted by Stein and Carey (1986) found that children came into care amidst circumstances of poverty and other disadvantage, and that they were also subject to further material and social disadvantage after leaving care. They found that the young care leavers in their study had encountered change, trouble and disruption whilst in care, and were often extremely ill prepared for leaving care, as well as existing on the poverty line, thus increasing their sense of isolation. Stein and Carey concluded:

> *"...there was little evidence that state care was able to compensate for what was judged by social services to be missing in their background. In comparison with young people who had not been in care, our young people were more likely to be unemployed, to lack educational qualifications, to be living in poverty, to change accommodation frequently and to be confused about their pasts and unsettled in their present relationships. At its worst the state had become an added burden rather than a supportive parent."* (Stein and Carey 1986: 179).

Sadly, little has changed in the intervening years. Care leavers continue to be over-represented amongst the unemployed, homeless, and those in poverty in adulthood (Axford 2008). Young care leavers are also at greater risk of early parenthood than other young people, as well as being more likely to be involved in offending behaviour, and to have drug or alcohol problems (The Prince's Trust 2002). The immediate problems facing young care leavers have often been found to impact more on their sense of well-being than previous events:

> *"... how young people fared in housing and how they felt about their mental health and well-being was, for many, influenced more by current rather than past events in their lives. Like all of us, young people experience life as interconnected. What happens in one sphere of life has implications for others, whether for good or for ill."*
> (Wade and Dixon 2006: 207).

Young care leavers are extremely vulnerable in terms of a lack of resources. Problems commonly identified by young people themselves include a sense of isolation, poverty, separation and a lack of suitable accommodation (Broad 2005). They also tend to experience much faster and riskier transitions to independence than young people in the general population (Wade and Dixon 2006). Many can feel that the process of leaving care happens too abruptly, and without sufficient preparation (Centrepoint 2006). Some young people have expressed concern that they are leaving care before they are ready, and may not be able to cope, or may be lonely (Children's Rights Director 2006). There is also evidence from care leavers that preparation for leaving care can focus too much on practical skills, and not enough on all the problems they encounter such as loneliness (Centrepoint 2006). Feeling lonely and isolated can lead to depression and this can adversely affect a young person's ability to maintain study or work (Centrepoint 2006). One study found that care leavers aged under eighteen had problems in dealing simultaneously with studying and the practical aspects of leaving care (Jackson and Ajayi 2007).

Historically, early parenthood has been more common amongst care leavers than young people in the general population (Biehal and Wade 1996: 84); a situation which continues to be of concern, with significant numbers of young women becoming mothers while still in care (Department for Children, Schools and Families 2009a). However, there is some evidence that becoming a mother is not always perceived by young people to be negative. Having their own child has been found to offer some young people love and the opportunity to belong to a family (Broad 2005), while some young mothers see motherhood as being about responsibility and the need to grow up (Rolfe 2008), and an opportunity for reflection and moving forward with their lives (Chase and Knight 2006).

Young people's experiences of leaving care can also be compounded by racism or disability. Young care leavers from ethnic minorities can encounter racism, and struggle with issues of identity (The Prince's Trust 2002). Unaccompanied asylum seeking children may experience increased difficulties in the transition to leaving care. Research evidence illustrates that they may enter independent living earlier than other looked after children due to disputes about their age, and they may also be 'dispersed' (relocated) to other parts of the country, thus losing contact with friends (Chase *et al.* 2008). They can often feel isolated, and may develop mental health problems connected to previous violence and trauma. In these situations support from any family members also in the country, including older siblings, can be very important, particularly in terms of maintaining a sense of identity (Chase *et al.* 2008). There is some evidence to suggest that boys may be more likely to mask their emotional feelings and wait until crisis point before seeking help (Chase *et al.* 2008), which is of particular concern, given that sixty-nine percent of unaccompanied asylum seeking children and young people are male (Department for Children, Schools and Families 2009a).

Being disabled can also put young people at increased risk on leaving care, as demonstrated in one study in which previous foster carers and social workers expressed worry that young people were not doing well, alongside concerns for their safety and security (Baker 2007). An added dimension for some disabled young people can be the loss of a friend who has acted as an interpreter. Where one young person moves on without the other in this way, this can be a major loss, yet this has been found not to be reflected in any pathway planning (Priestly *et al.* 2003).

Support from siblings and peers after leaving care

Whilst studies have addressed the value of continued contact with significant adults after leaving care (Schofield 2003, Schofield *et al.* 2007), there is limited knowledge concerning the value of support from peers or siblings. Contact with siblings has been identified as valuable in terms of a sense of familial belonging (Biehal *et al.* 1995). Sibling relationships may also fulfil a support need for young people, and for some may replace relationships they have been unable to maintain with their carers. One study (Wade 2008) found that young care leavers were more likely to be in touch with a sibling than with any other relative, while another found that family tension could act to privilege relationships with siblings over those with parents (The Prince's Trust 2002). Older siblings who were already living independently could also fulfil a semi-parental role, offering support, advice and practical help (Wade 2008). Fiancés and boyfriends, as well as their families, have been found to provide an important source of support if young people experience difficulties (Sinclair *et al.* 2005). Young mothers have been found to value informal peer support, as well as support from older siblings and friends after leaving care (Cooke and Owen 2007).

Friends can often play a supportive role for young care leavers, and are frequently cited among the people they would turn to for help (The Prince's Trust 2002, Sinclair *et al.* 2005). Having a good network of friends increases the likelihood of young care leavers

feeling positive about their lives in general (Dixon 2008). Young people who lack such

networks can experience low self esteem and well-being, and this can lead to difficulties

in coping (Dixon and Stein 2005). Many young people leaving care can experience

difficulties in maintaining close and supportive friendships. It is not uncommon for them

to feel isolated and to consider themselves to be without close friends (The Prince's

Trust 2002). However, negotiating relationships can in itself prove challenging for

young people, especially given that leaving care often coincides with reduced adult

guidance. Whilst friends can provide invaluable support, they can also misuse

friendship and cause trouble for care leavers (Broad 2005). Peers can exert a negative

influence, and young people can find themselves having to make choices to separate

from friends in order to avoid offending behaviour (Dixon and Stein 2005). Young

mothers can be subjected to violence from their partners (Cooke and Owen 2007).

Children's views on care and their sibling and peer relationships

Children generally have historically been an 'unheard voice' within studies (Rushton *et
al.* 2001), and the consequences of this lack of research have been a paucity of

research and knowledge regarding children's relationships from their own standpoint.

The implications of such major gaps in knowledge for looked after children, who may

have experienced great disruption within their relationships, are particularly serious.

Berridge's (1997) review of research studies over the previous twenty years

demonstrated that little attention in research terms had been given to children's

relationships with each other. He found a few studies covering children's views on

foster homes, which touched on the friendliness of peers and the need for advice on

making relationships and friendships. The lack of research concerning children's

relationships due to a child-adult focus was also acknowledged.

Subsequent studies have found that children value their relationships with a range of sibling and friends (Kosonen 1999, 2000, Cleaver 2000):

> *"… when I see them [younger siblings] I get really excited … I've got to be in their life otherwise they won't get on … Jamie [2 years] thinks I'm his mum. He knows me mum as some lady, he thinks I'm his mum 'cos I used to put him to bed and everything."* (Cleaver 2000: 174).

> *"… I go and see my mates Ellie and Susan, or I play in the park and see Martin [5-year-old brother] if he's in the house."* (Cleaver 2000: 185).

One study revealed that children did not differentiate between full and half siblings when asked to identify who was important to them (Heptinstall *et al.* 2001). However, children's views on their relationships were not often sought (Harrison 1999, Horrocks and Milner 1999, Kosonen 1999, Ridge and Millar 2000). Although there were some large scale consultations of looked after children, these tended to be restricted to seeking their general views, rather than finding out about their relationships (Fletcher 1993, Shaw 1998, Timms and Thoburn 2003).

However, a growing awareness of children as social actors with valid perspectives, combined with legislative requirements for their increased consultation (Department for Education and Skills 2007), has resulted in the gradual establishment of a body of knowledge concerning their views on their relationships. Small scale studies and larger consultations have begun to provide a better overview of the effects of care on children's relationships, as well as their perspectives on the subject. Recent reports by the Children's Rights Director (2005, 2009a,b,c,d) have been especially instrumental in gathering new evidence on the effects of care on children's relationships. They have begun to reveal common themes in the lives of looked after young people, related to difficulties in maintaining existing sibling and peer relationships, as well as establishing new ones. The extent of separation from siblings has been identified as particularly serious, following a report surveying 1200 children which found that whilst two-thirds of

them thought siblings should be placed together, only a quarter of them with siblings in care were actually placed together (Children's Rights Director 2009b). The most recent report, *Keeping in Touch* (Children's Rights Director 2009a), revealed that children and young people's relationships are being seriously affected by their time in care, highlighting major themes of separation and loss from other children in their lives. It has also been recognised that children may have broader definitions of who is important to them than simply siblings, as recent consultation has illustrated that as well as siblings, they also miss cousins, nephews and nieces while living in care (Children's Rights Director 2009a).

Sibling relationships

Some research studies have revealed that entering care with their siblings can provide children with reassurance. One young person described moving to foster care as *"Upsetting because I didn't know anyone, but I came with my sister so I felt OK"* (Sinclair *et al.* 2005: 165). Another commented: *"If you have a sibling with you it is better because you can have a bit of your birth family all the time"* (Children's Rights Director 2009a: 32). Children in kinship placements have also reported good contact with, and knowledge about, siblings: *"My baby brother's dead cute. We see him loads. He even gets to stay here sometimes"* (Aldgate 2009: 60). *"… it's good actually, at least you know who they are, they can make me happy"* (Hunt *et al.* 2008: 247). However, either becoming or remaining looked after with siblings is unfortunately not a common experience. Many children have cited missing family members as a significant concern (Ward *et al.* 2005, Children's Rights Director 2005, 2009b,d). Missing siblings specifically (Sinclair *et al.* 2005), and losing contact with them, have also been familiar themes. Children have spoken about wishing to *"see my two little sisters that I only see once a year if lucky"* (Sinclair *et al.* 2005: 153), and wishing to *"See my mum's two new babies"* (Sinclair *et al.* 2005: 153). They have stated: *"Babies lose contact until they are a certain age – that's not fair"* (Children's Rights Director 2009a: 9).

Children have also voiced their opinions about the importance of staying with siblings: "*Don't split us up. It is hard enough coming into care, without not seeing my brother/sister*" (Children's Rights Director 2009a: 32). "*My sister was in a different placement to me. We ran away all the time to see each other. We should have been together*" (Children's Rights Director 2009a: 32). "*[I wish to] Stay with my brothers forever*" (Sinclair *et al.* 2005: 153). They have expressed the significance of having siblings for support: "*Brothers and sisters need to guide each other through hard times*" (Children's Rights Director 2009a: 32). A recent consultation on children's rights found that children placed the right to keep in touch with brothers and sisters as amongst the ten most important rights (Children's Rights Director 2010).

Separation due to distance can create further difficulties for young people in trying to maintain relationships with siblings and friends. Unaccompanied asylum seeking children, for instance, may view siblings as extremely important, having lost contact with those in other countries, or witnessed their deaths (Chase *et al.* 2008). Studies consulting looked after disabled children are noticeable by their absence; however one consultation found evidence that they were much more likely than other children to list being away from siblings as one of the worst things about being in care (Children's Rights Director 2009c). There is also evidence that those with disabilities may have problems keeping in contact without adult help: "*My brother has autism and no one has helped him keeping in contact*" (Children's Rights Director 2009a: 9).

Although some children may initially be placed with one or more siblings, subsequent separations often happen:

> "*Well, I went with my brother but I got moved and he didn't ... I came here and I haven't seen him for ages. I saw him about a year ago.*" (Boy, 9)
> (Padbury and Frost 2002: 35).

Where siblings have been split up, children still view the relationship as important:

> "*Try their hardest to keep them together but if they don't, make sure they don't drift apart and become more like distant relatives than brothers and sisters*"
> (Children's Rights Director 2009a: 32).

Children's accounts also provide evidence of the finality of loss of sibling relationships through adoption (Padbury and Frost 2002, Children's Rights Director 2009a). Children's comments range from *"It's like they've gone missing"* (Children's Rights Director 2009a: 10), to *"You shouldn't lose kids that are adopted"* (Children's Rights Director 2009a: 32). Unfortunately, children often have no choice other than to accept that a sibling has been adopted and cannot be contacted:

> *"We rang the social workers and we asked if they could find her ... for my sister to get in touch with me. [My foster carer] was going to try and do something to try and get her to live with us, but we found out she was adopted so we couldn't ... I'll find her when I'm older."* (Girl aged 12) (Padbury and Frost 2002: 3-5).

Friendships

There is a great deal of evidence from feedback from children themselves to suggest that friends are very important for looked after children: *"… sometimes friends mean more than family"* (Children's Rights Director 2009a: 20). They can provide someone to talk to when a child is upset, or someone to have fun with (Beek and Schofield 2004). One study found that 62 percent of children consulted were most likely to go to a friend for help if they felt unsafe (Children's Rights Director 2009b). This is particularly concerning, given that children have also said that frequent moves can interfere with friendships, and that making new friends can be particularly hard (Children's Rights Director 2009b, Selwyn *et al.* 2010). Where friendships have been formed within a placement setting, separation can occur frequently, without warning, and can be permanent:

> *"There's so many kids coming in and out of children's homes, or foster homes. You can have a best friend one day, and then you can go to the shop and they've gone, and they're not allowed to tell you where they've gone, so you don't know. 'Cos it's local authority and you don't know who you're getting in next."*
> (Skuse and Ward 2003: 118).

Missing friends is often cited as a major issue related to being in care (Ward *et al.* 2005, Children's Rights Director 2005, 2009b). Children can find it difficult to maintain friendships over distance:

"You ring them and they're not there. It is awful. Like I still remember my friend and haven't spoken to her for two years. I just gave in." (Girl, 13)

(Padbury and Frost 2002: 34).

Another child in this study was asked if he still saw his old friends, and responded: *"Not 'til I go home when I'm sixteen. I've got seven years left"* (Boy, 9) (Padbury and Frost 2002: 34). A high proportion of disabled children in one study emphasised the extent to which they missed friends (Children's Rights Director 2009c). Children's living arrangements may also have some impact on their ability to make or maintain friendships. Children in residential care for instance, have reported finding friendships problematic due to the difficulty of inviting friends to the home (Children's Rights Director 2009d). There is, however, some evidence related to children in kinship care placements, which suggests that where children have moved home at a young age, they may be able to compensate for losing friends by establishing themselves as part of a new peer group: *"I did miss people when we moved but now it's not a big issue missing them because I've got friends here"* (Aldgate 2009: 60).

Care leavers' relationships

Young people leaving care can have significant worries such as loneliness, lack of money, homelessness and not being able to cope (Children's Rights Director 2006): *"You have people helping you and then all of a sudden you're on your own"* (Children's Rights Director 2006: 23), *"I'm lonely living by myself. I have to pay the bills which I can't"* (Sinclair *et al.* 2005: 196). They can also find it hard to deal with the pressures from their peers which result from having a place of their own:

"My friends are always at mine because I'm the only one with a decent flat. But then they cause problems with the neighbours and I get in trouble. I spend most of my

money on stuff for them but then when I've got no money they never come round or nothing. But they're my mates." (Broad 2005: 86-87).

Lack of finances can also result in care leavers becoming more isolated from their peers: *"Hard to make friends and socialise on the money you are given"* (Children's Rights Director 2006: 22). Where young people have had to move away from the area, this has also been found to have a major impact on their friendships:

"Losing all my friends was terrible. I spent years with some friends. They were part of my life until I HAD TO MOVE." (Sinclair *et al.* 2005: 178). *"The worst thing for me was moving out of area away from friends.*" (Children's Rights Director 2006: 7).

Young people may have had arguments with family and friends (Sinclair *et al.* 2005), resulting in isolation from both potential support networks. Where family relationships are problematic, greater value may be placed on friendships:

"I get on better with my friends than my family. It has always been like this. They are good to me and help me and listen to me." "My friends are my family now. They treat me better than any of my family did." (Broad 2005: 75).

However, both friends (The Prince's Trust 2002, Broad 2005), and siblings (Sinclair *et al.* 2005, Wade 2008) have been found to provide invaluable support:

"I have a couple of good friends. I don't know what I'd do without them."

(Broad 2005: 75).

"The good things in my life at the moment is I am getting on much better with my family: my sister has got a baby who I am going to see ..."

(Dixon and Stein 2005: 113).

Where they are able, young people often turn to friends or family for support, especially as social workers can prove inaccessible (Children's Rights Director 2006).

Some young care leavers have also been reported as finding support in the formation of new families of their own (The Prince's Trust 2002, Broad 2005, Sinclair *et al.* 2005):

"Main thing is I have got a son of my own and got engaged and my girlfriend and I have got my own place with my girlfriend and my son." (Sinclair *et al.* 2005: 197).

"We live in a nice house with my boyfriend and I'm expecting another child. His family are now my family and we couldn't be looked after any better." (Sinclair *et al.* 2005: 197).

The changing legal and policy context of being looked after

As the following review shows, the legal and policy framework for looked after children reflects both established ideas about children, such as the importance of attachments to adult carers, alongside historical concerns that much needs to be done to improve the overall life chances for this vulnerable group of children.

The current legal and policy framework is set against a backdrop of historical concerns regarding the lives of children in care, as part of which continued attempts to improve the situation have been made, through legal reforms dating from the Children and Young Persons Act 1933 through to the present day (Jackson 2006). It has been argued that the Children Act 1989 in particular was designed with the aim of achieving a major shift in the way in which public care for children was conceptualised, and that it has resulted in some improvements:

"Overall, more effort now goes into maintaining contact between looked-after children and their birth families, and there is more general recognition of the importance of ethnic and cultural identity" (Jackson 2006: 20).

There is also growing understanding about the importance of siblings and peers in children's lives, as well as better awareness of the need to consider placements which may promote these relationships, such as kinship care (Department for Education and Skills 2006b, 2007). The position of siblings within the law has also been strengthened, through the prioritising of sibling placements, as local authorities now have a duty under

the Children and Young Persons Act 2008 to consider placements near a child's home, or with siblings. Nevertheless, the current legal framework still does not adequately recognise the importance of sibling and peer relationships for looked after children. Legal requirements to place siblings together or to maintain contact do not go far enough to ensure that relationships are maintained. This is most apparent in situations where siblings are adopted, and the links between them and their brothers and sisters are legally severed, currently giving children no rights of appeal within the law. An example of this can be found in the case of an adopted nine year old, who applied for contact with her seven year old brother, but was refused leave to apply for a section 8 contact order under the Children Act 1989 on the basis that the adoptive mother of the boy should be able to decide in his best interests (Roche 2005). The popularity of adoption in policy reflects influential ideas about parent-child attachments (discussed in Chapter Two), which have been used to bring adoption to prominence as the best means of achieving permanence for looked after children (Department of Health 2000b, Department for Children, Schools and Families 2008a), as recognised in the Adoption and Children Act 2002.

Current policy also fails to recognise or acknowledge the diverse ways in which children define siblings. In particular there is no means of recognising relationships which may have no biological basis, yet which may be important and therefore beneficial for children. One influential theme, informing legislation concerning the life chances for children in care, results from awareness that looked after children are not achieving to the same extent as children in the general population. There are many initiatives in this area, two of the most prominent being the drive to improve educational outcomes, as embodied in the Children Act 2004, and the need to improve placement stability (Department for Children, Schools and Families 2009b). There is also a commitment to hearing the voices of looked after children through increased consultation (Department for Education and Skills 2007). The following section will consider what has

characterised the legal and policy context related to looked after children, with a particular focus on the ways in which it may have affected their sibling or peer relationships.

Children Act 1989

Historically, there has been some recognition of the importance of sibling ties, dating back to the Children Act 1989, which established local authorities' duty to accommodate a child with his or her siblings if it is "*reasonably practical and consistent with his welfare*" (s23 (7)(b)). The element of practicality, however, meant that this was not guaranteed to happen, and would also be reliant on external factors such as placement availability. The 1989 Act also introduced a new duty in respect of children in care which had a long term aim: *"... to advise, assist and befriend young people who are looked after with a view to promote their welfare when they cease to be looked after ..."* (s24 (1)). This led to a country-wide creation of specialist aftercare schemes; however it became apparent that service provision varied greatly in quality and resourcing, and that the wider social policy framework was inconsistent (Stein 2004).

Quality Protects and Choice Protects

A government initiative in the form of the Quality Protects programme (Department of Health 1998) was specifically intended to improve the experiences and life chances of looked after children (Ward *et al.* 2005). Objectives for the Quality Protects programme, for instance, included ensuring care and protection for children, enhanced life chances, and more successful adult lives for care leavers (Adams 2002). This was mainly to be achieved for looked after children by concentrating on the relationship between children and their carers. The programme was linked to a further initiative, Choice Protects, which aimed to improve placement options and stability for looked after children (Cocker and Allain 2008).

Children (Leaving Care) Act 2000

The Children (Leaving Care) Act 2000 came into force in October 2001, and contained more robust requirements to assess and meet the needs of young people in the process of leaving care, which included pathway planning and the appointment of a personal adviser for advice and support (Stein 2004). In a later section of this chapter related to practice developments, it will be seen that although pathway plans are potentially useful in identifying supportive relationships with siblings and peers, they do not always involve sufficient assessment (National Care Advisory Service 2009).

Adoption and Children Act 2002

The drive for permanence for looked after children has been dominated by a belief in adoption as the ultimate solution, as reflected in the Government White Paper *Adoption: A New Approach* (Department of Health 2000b), and echoed in much ensuing policy. The Department of Health (2001, 2002) set targets to increase the numbers of children adopted from care (2700 in 1999-2000) by 40 percent by 2004, and 50 percent by 2006. It also set targets to increase the numbers of children adopted within twelve months of a decision for adoption being made, from 81 percent in 2000-01 to 95 percent by 2004-05. The Adoption and Children Act 2002 has been instrumental in a nationwide campaign to raise the numbers of children adopted from care, as a result of a belief that adoption is the best means of achieving permanence for children. A recent review of adoption targets for children within twelve months of a decision found variations of between 100 percent and 30 percent, with an average of 76 percent, across local authorities in 2007-2008 (Department for Children, Schools and Families 2008a).

The Adoption and Children Act 2002 now requires the courts to consider the possible effects on a child of ceasing to be part of their original family, as well as the nature and value of continued contact with relatives, although there is no presumption of contact post adoption. However, the ultimate reality of adoption is that it severs the links

between a child and their birth family, consequently children are no longer siblings by law. Cocker and Allain (2008) have argued that adoption is not an appropriate route for all children. Sayer goes further:

> *"... it is debatable whether the current policy of increasing the number of children offered 'permanence' through adoption is more about getting children out of care, rather than meeting their needs ... it is questionable whether it is right to legally sever a child's links with their past, even if they are unable to live with their birth parents."* (Sayer 2008: 140).

Despite awareness that permanence can be achieved in a number of ways, the perceived importance of the parent-child attachment continues to drive the policy agenda for adoption, presenting it as the best option for many looked after children. As has been argued earlier, adoption is continuing to result in long-term or permanent separation for many looked after children and their siblings.

Children Act 2004

The Children Act 2004 gives greater prominence to children's feelings than in the Children Act 1989, requiring that where practicable these be ascertained prior to decisions about accommodation being made under section 20 of the Children Act 1989. This is commensurate with an awareness of the importance of consulting children about decisions which concern their lives. This may afford children opportunities for greater involvement in placement decisions, particularly where these are likely to affect their relationships with siblings and peers. However, placement availability will inevitably restrict the options open to them. The Act also introduces a particular duty to promote the educational achievement of looked after children, which may lead to improved educational outcomes for those in and leaving care. However the contributory nature of other factors to educational success such as the care environment and placement instability must also be acknowledged (Berridge and Saunders 2009).

The publication of the Green Paper *Care Matters: Transforming the Lives of Children and Young People in Care* (Department for Education and Skills 2006b) and the White Paper *Care Matters: Time for Change* (Department for Education and Skills 2007) helped to push further reforms intended to change and improve the circumstances of looked after children. Local authorities are now prevented from placing children out of the local authority area unless this will be in their best interests (Department for Education and Skills 2007). This move will help to reduce the numbers of children who undergo long lasting separation from siblings or peers as a result of being unable to maintain relationships over distances. Furthermore, the importance of staying near home in order to preserve links with family and friends has been recognised: *"If you're put into care you should be able to stay in the town or part of the county you came from so you can stay with your mates"* (Department for Education and Skills 2006b: 44). Local authorities must ensure that children do not move schools during years ten and eleven unless under exceptional circumstances (Department for Education and Skills 2007), which may help children to retain friendships which will be important for later in life. There is also a recognition that friends can contribute towards health and well-being, and an aim to ensure that young people can participate in activities with their peers (Department for Education and Skills 2007). Local authorities are also expected to give looked after children more opportunity to express their views, by creating Children in Care Councils, forums designed to give children a say in the services and support provided to them (Department for Education and Skills 2007).

The Care Matters implementation plan *Care Matters: Time to deliver for children in care* (Department for Children, Schools and Families 2008b) includes new recognition of the importance of peer relationships formed within foster placements, as well as existing friendships:

"If I move, I want to stay in touch with my last placement – with my carer and with other young people fostered with me. I also want to stay in touch with my family and friends." (Department for Children, Schools and Families 2008b: 10).

The Care Matters agenda has made some significant steps in recognising the importance of looked after children's sibling and peer relationships, and has taken some measures which may lessen the effects of separation and loss within them. However, the continued focus on the benefits for children of attachment to adults, such as in the formation of resilience, means that the benefits of children's sibling and peer relationships are still underestimated, and therefore not sufficiently prioritised within policy.

Part of the Care Matters agenda was concerned with improving placement stability, in terms of length of placement, and reducing numbers of placement moves. The *Care Matters: Ministerial Stocktake Report 2009* (Department for Children, Schools and Families 2009b) notes some improvement: the national average for children with three or more placements has gone down from 13.7 percent in 2004 to 10.7 percent in 2009, while the national average for children in long term placements has increased from 62.9 percent in 2005 to 67 percent in 2009. However the report also acknowledges that progress across local authorities was much more variable, with nine authorities reporting 15 to 19 percent of children having three or more moves. There are also indications that care leavers are beginning to fare better, with increased numbers in further education and living in better accommodation; however there is insufficient evidence to reach conclusions on the success of the Care Matters reforms in this and other areas at this early stage.

The most significant change for young people leaving care is the emphasis which *Care Matters: Time for Change* (Department for Education and Skills 2007) places on transitioning from, rather than leaving, care; an approach designed to aid in the gradual preparation of young people for leaving care. The impact of this new approach will be

evaluated mainly through the Staying Put and Right2BCared4 pilots (Department for Children, Schools and Families 2008b), although such initiatives may be of more benefit to those young people who have an existing stable foster placement in which they are able to remain. There is also an acknowledgement that some young people, such as pregnant young women in and leaving care, will require extra support and guidance (Department for Education and Skills 2007), although no extra services are provided for them in this respect.

Children and Young Persons Act 2008

The Care Matters reforms informed the Children and Young Persons Act 2008, which contains key provisions related to looked after children, such as the duties to provide more appropriate accommodation, as well as increased assistance to looked after children and care leavers regarding education. The position of siblings entering care is slightly strengthened within the 2008 Act, as placements are required to be near a child's home, as well as being with a sibling who is also looked after by the local authority, although this will not occur in the event that it is not '*reasonably practicable*'. Also, any such measures may not be able to take account of the numerous sibling relationships which looked after children can have at the point of entering care, let alone new ones which are created during their time in care. Children may, however, have more opportunities to be placed with or near siblings as a result of the requirement to consider placements with friends or family before those in foster or residential care. The potential value of kinship placements for supporting contact between siblings has been discussed earlier in this chapter. It remains to be seen whether this will result in an increase in kinship placements, and whether such placements will be provided with the support necessary to succeed in the long term. The increased assistance to be provided to young people up to the age of twenty-five in order to pursue education is welcome, although this needs to be backed up by resources which are effectively implemented (Berridge and Saunders 2009).

House of Commons Children, Schools and Families Committee Report 2009

In 2009 this House of Commons Select Committee published a timely report relating to many of the ongoing concerns about the lives of, and outcomes for, looked after children (Children, Schools and Families Committee, House of Commons, 2009). *[For the rest of the thesis this citation will just be Children, Schools and Families Committee.]* The Committee was formed following the creation in June 2007 of the Department for Children, Schools and Families. The intention behind the report was to gain a better understanding of the reasons for the existing long term problems within the care system, as well as to investigate whether the governmental reforms proposed through the Care Matters programme would be sufficient to tackle such problems.

The Committee report has addressed some of the recent initiatives within legislation and policy which are intended to bring about improvements across the board. It was written following the submission of detailed evidence from a variety of organisations and individuals working and researching in the area, which demonstrated the extent of the ongoing problems which looked after children and care leavers face in their daily lives. The Committee subsequently highlighted areas in which it believes that much more could be done to benefit looked after children and care leavers. It has highlighted the need for assessment of placement supply at a national level, in order to ensure the Care Matters reforms can be delivered. It has also emphasised the need for consideration of residential care as a valuable resource for some young people. The Committee has identified the need to narrow the gap between care leavers and young people in the general population, by recommending that they remain in care in some form until the age of twenty-one, rather than eighteen, within the current Staying Put pilots. All of these recommendations would contribute to improving the lives of looked after children.

Crucially, the Committee also took the views of some looked after children, who were able to express their views on the importance of siblings and friends, including young

people to whom they were not related. The Committee placed strong emphasis on the need to improve independent consultation with children:

> *"Only by setting more store by children's satisfaction with their care will we get closer to finding out how 'cared about' they really feel, how stable and secure their lives seem ... Initiatives that seek to give children - collectively and individually - more say about their care must be specific, robust and enforceable. The variation currently apparent in service leads us to believe that more independent support is needed for children to express their views and have them listened to."*
>
> (Children, Schools and Families Committee 2009: 15).

Recommendations such as this may enable young people to speak out as well as to be heard effectively in the future.

Practice developments concerning looked after children's sibling and peer relationships

Social work practice with looked after children has been characterised by established methods of working such as life story work (Willis and Holland 2009), and advocacy (Oliver and Dalrymple 2008), alongside newer initiatives such as Social Work Practices, currently in pilot form (Department for Children, Schools and Families 2008c), and the exploration of the value of pedagogy in relation to residential care (Department for Children, Schools and Families 2008b). Life story work and advocacy are now being explored in more depth in the light of increased knowledge concerning the needs and wishes of looked after children. More recent initiatives like the Social Work Practice pilot projects stem from real concerns about the welfare of looked after children, particularly in terms of their underachievement in relation to the five key outcomes discussed in Chapter Two. These concerns are also linked to longstanding problems faced by care leavers, including their over-representation amongst vulnerable groups of adults such as young parents, prisoners and homeless people (Department for Education and Skills 2006b).

Life story work

Life story work, which is a means of helping children make sense of events and relationships within their lives, has become a more prominent part of social work practice following new requirements in the Adoption and Children Act 2002 for children to have knowledge of their history. Life story work has been found to contribute to children's sense of self-esteem and sense of identity (Willis and Holland 2009), and as such has potential to play a vital part in establishing children's sense of self in relation to other birth family members such as siblings. For instance, it can offer opportunities for a child to identify with siblings, by having photos of them wearing the same baby clothes as their brother (Willis and Holland 2009). Where looked after children have no knowledge of their origins or birth family history, this may have serious implications for their sense of identity (Winter and Cohen 2005). This is illustrated by a study which found that those children who were looked after were much more likely than other children to have lost contact with siblings and other family members, and to have a low sense of self esteem and of self (Moss 2009). Winter and Cohen have argued that:

"… practice (in word and in deed) should reflect the rights to and the potential value of identity for the looked after children and young people with whose care they [practitioners] are charged." (Winter and Cohen 2005: 52).

If life story work is to be effective, it needs to recognise the role of siblings and peers in the maintenance of identity for looked after children, and ensure they have an equal profile to that of birth parents in the construction of individual life stories. However, practitioners engaging in life story work also need to be aware of external influences on the process which will dictate what are currently acceptable versions of birth family history to be given to looked after children:

"There is a need for a more critical examination of life story work and recognition that far from being a neutral, benign activity, it is an example of the use of social work power. Life story work reflects the changing face of social work." (Baynes 2008: 45).

Advocacy

Advocacy provides a means for children and young people of having a voice in decisions concerning their lives, which is particularly important as they are often silenced by those in a more powerful position in society, for example adults (Oliver 2006). Although advocacy is not new, it has only gained statutory status in recent years, within the Adoption and Children Act 2002. Local authorities now have a statutory duty to provide an advocate for any child who has a complaint (Oliver 2006). Advocacy has a significant role to play in the context of new awareness of children as social actors, as discussed in Chapter Two. The concept of advocacy as being about speaking out implies that children and young people in need of advocacy are often marginalised by those who are more powerful, which is especially relevant for looked after children who experience *"double jeopardy … (as) they are both children and stigmatised for being in care"* (Oliver and Dalrymple 2008: 12). The provision of advocacy to looked after children is particularly important in allowing them to express their views on decisions made regarding their sibling relationships. For instance, where a sibling is to be adopted with potential for the cessation of contact, advocacy can provide a young person with a means of conveying their views to the courts (Chase 2008). It therefore has an important role to play for children who risk having their relationships altered or lost as a result of adult decisions.

The profile of advocacy has also been raised through the Every Child Matters agenda, (Department for Education and Skills 2004a) alongside the introduction of the Right2Bcared4 pilots (Department for Children, Schools and Families 2008b). These pilots are designed to support young people in becoming involved in decisions concerning the timing of when they leave care, and will involve the nomination of an independent person to help them express their wishes and feelings. In this way the government hopes to assess *"the value of advocacy in the care planning and review process"* (Department for Children, Schools and Families 2008b: 9). Sayer (2008) has

argued that the need for advocates is evidence that the current system (in which local authorities are supposed to act in the child's best interests) is not working. There are also concerns that looked after children should be entitled to an advocate regarding all decisions about their care, not just regarding complaints (Oliver 2006, Children, Schools and Families Committee 2009), and that advocates are not always perceived to be independent of the local authority (Chase 2008). Given the wider marginalisation to which looked after children are subject, advocacy provided independently of the local authority should continue to play a role in assisting them to have a voice in decisions which affect their sibling or peer relationships.

Social Work Practices

Social Work Practices, which are currently being piloted, may result in significant changes in the role and function of social workers with looked after children. The Practices, established as part of the Every Child Matters agenda, have been set up to ascertain whether social workers, through independent organisations, can provide improved continuity and stability for looked after children (Department for Children, Schools and Families 2008c). They will consist of organisations which contract with local authorities, taking on their statutory duties and responsibilities related to looked after children, and specifically those in long term care (Department for Children, Schools and Families 2008c). The model of Social Work Practices aims to redress the balance in allowing social workers to spend more time with children and less on administrative tasks. It is to be hoped that the Practices will result in stronger relationships between social workers and looked after children, and therefore better knowledge of what, and who, matters to them. They may also allow social workers more time and flexibility to consider contact arrangements between children and their siblings, and in general terms allow them to work with children on strengthening those relationships with siblings and peers which are important to them. The importance of supporting relationships with family and friends is increasingly recognised as a priority within the Every Child Matters

agenda (although there the guidance on how this should be achieved is not provided in great detail). It is also intended that social workers will continue their involvement with children even after leaving care, which may assist in the transition process.

However, it has been argued that within the process of developing the Social Work Practices, there has been insufficient consultation of those whom they affect most:

> *"... the dominant discourse on SWP's fails to encompass, in a satisfactory and convincing way, perspectives of parents and of children and young people 'looked after'."* (Garrett 2008: 317)

There is also currently a lack of clarity regarding how the Social Work Practices will work (Berridge and Saunders 2009). There may also be problems inherent in the evaluation of the model. The success of the service will be measured in part by outcomes, initially over a relatively short space of time, whereas in reality it may take many years for looked after children to achieve stability and success in any areas of their lives (Children, Schools and Families Committee 2009).

Regardless of whether they work within Social Work Practices or for local authorities, social workers will also remain restricted in their role by the tools prescribed for the job, in the form of the Assessment and Progress records. These records were originally introduced as Assessment and Action Records (Department of Health 1991) in 1995, as part of a response to growing concerns about the situation and the care of looked after children, and awareness of the need to measure outcomes (Parker et al. 1991). They were instrumental in beginning to reveal and address some of the major problems faced by children who become looked after. They have been updated within the new Integrated Children's System (Department of Health 2003); however they have retained a developmental focus, which is combined with a concentration on the value of relationships with adults. Children's peer relations, for instance, are discussed in terms of their use as indicators of children's relationships with carers and other adults (Department of Health 2003). The forms are not designed to acknowledge the significance of sibling or peer relationships for children's current well-being.

Staying Put pilots

Another pilot scheme currently under way is Staying Put (Department for Children, Schools and Families 2008b), an initiative which allows young people to remain with foster carers after the age of eighteen. This may increase the supportive base available to young people, and therefore improve the longer term outcomes for young people leaving care, which currently give cause for serious concern. It may also offer young people opportunities to form longer lasting relationships with other young people in the same placement or with the birth children of carers, which may benefit them after leaving care. However, this scheme will only benefit a small number of young people who have stable placements in which they can remain. It may also restrict the availability of placements for younger children and for those who want to return following a brief period at home or in between university terms (Children, Schools and Families Committee 2009). The government is also prioritising new skills-based training for foster carers, in recognition that they need improved training and support in order to engage better with the children in their care (Department for Children, Schools and Families 2008b). This is a positive move which may contribute to strengthening relationships between foster carers and looked after children.

The role of foster carers and adoptive parents in promoting contact

The quality and success of sibling contact may often be reliant on individual carers to facilitate it, especially after children have been adopted. This may involve foster carers and adoptive parents developing strong relationships between themselves. It may also involve adoptive parents in having to promote contact with siblings in difficult circumstances where there is ongoing contact with birth family members (Smith and Logan 2004). While children are looked after, foster carers may be helped and supported with sibling contact. After children are adopted, the difference in status of adopters as parents rather than foster carers can result in less local authority involvement, at a time when adopters may play a vital role in ensuring continued contact

between siblings (Smith and Logan 2004). Where adoptive carers are or become averse to sibling contact, children are likely to be powerless to change this (Lord and Borthwick 2008). However, the importance of encouraging and supporting adoptive carers in maintaining sibling contact for their children can be argued for, particularly in the light of more recent evidence concerning the risks and benefits of face to face post adoption contact. The study in question found that children's emotional and behavioural development was not connected to the amount of face to face contact they were, or were not having with birth family, concluding that:

> "What the results of this study do suggest is that general (as opposed to case-specific) fears about face-to-face contact having a detrimental effect on children's emotional and behavioural development need to be queried, especially for children placed in early childhood." (Neil 2009: 17).

In addition, decisions regarding sibling contact post adoption must be considered not just in terms of the current reassurance which they can provide, but also as a future investment when relationships may take on increased importance (Smith and Logan 2004).

Residential care

Residential care has traditionally been seen as a last resort, tending to care for those children who have been unable to settle elsewhere, and who are especially vulnerable as a result (Petrie and Simon 2006). The Select Committee report (Children, Schools and Families Committee 2009) has recognised that although residential care provision often has to cater for some of the most vulnerable and disadvantaged children within the care system, the closure of many large establishments has led to a concentration on improving foster care as a resource for such children. The Committee report has indicated a hope that residential care will be considered on its own merits rather than being sidelined as a last resort for vulnerable children. The background to the Committee's concerns is a general debate about the inadequacy of residential care in its

current form, particularly in terms of the lack of qualifications held by residential workers (Petrie and Simon 2006). Concerns about both the vulnerability of the residential care population, and the experience of its workers, have led to the development of Social Pedagogy pilots, in which a social pedagogic approach is being piloted in residential children's homes in England over a period of three years (Department for Children, Schools and Families 2008b).

Social pedagogy is a recognised practice in several European countries, and comprises a theoretical and practical approach which brings together care and education in providing overall support for children's development. A social pedagogue sees him or herself as *"a person in relationship with the child, not simply as a professional worker"* (Petrie and Simon 2006: 117). It has been found to achieve success in building relationships with children as well as providing group support (Department for Children, Schools and Families 2008b). A comparison of residential homes in Denmark and Germany (employing staff trained as social pedagogues), with English residential homes, found that in the European homes, children often had much longer placements, closer relationships with peers in the same home, more involvement with friends outside the home and greater contact with families. They were also provided with greater support with employment and accommodation after leaving care (Petrie and Simon 2006).

Research concerning residential care provision in England has found that it has the potential to work well where staff members are able to provide emotional support to looked after young people:

> *"Wellfunctioning [sic] homes had developed a culture in which the staff group could be extremely supportive of residents. Relationships with staff members in these homes were greatly valued – and for much the same reasons as those with social workers. Young people particularly appreciated staff who could communicate well with them and understand their feelings."* (Ward *et al.* 2005: 14).

Research has also considered the need to be flexible in considering how young people access support:

> *"... flexibility about what family membership means should allow policy makers and practitioners to value the ways in which young adults may draw on kinship resources in several 'families', including, in some cases, residential care."*
>
> (Schofield 2003: 241).

Government policy has acknowledged that some young people may cope better in a residential situation than in a family environment (Department for Education and Skills 2006b). However, there is still a long way to go. Whilst post-eighteen placements are being piloted in foster care, there has been no commitment made to pilot similar schemes in respect of residential care. The only commitment is to assess the demand for young people to remain in residential care post eighteen (Department for Education and Skills 2007). Evidence from the use of social pedagogy in residential care in Europe (Petrie and Simon 2006) suggests that its use in this country has the potential to improve relationships between children and staff, as well as having a variety of benefits in terms of strengthening children's relationships with their siblings and peers.

Voluntary sector practice with looked after children

There is a recent initiative in the voluntary sector which is taking practical steps to address some of the challenges faced by children in maintaining their sibling relationships. 'Siblings Together' is a not-for-profit company established in 2008 which runs twice-yearly camps or activities for siblings across England separated through the care system. It also caters for siblings in kinship and adoptive placements, or who have left care. The aim is to provide them with interaction and shared experiences which cannot be achieved through short contact sessions. Some evidence on the success of the programme is contained on the company website (Siblings Together 2008), in the form of comments from siblings who attended the first pilot camp in 2009:

> *"We got to know each other again, and better."* (Siblings Together 2008).

"I would like to get enough money to buy a building so that all siblings can have a chance for a holiday together." (Siblings Together 2008).

This initiative is a small but significant step from within the voluntary sector, which recognises that much more needs to be done to help looked after children retain and develop their sibling relationships.

Practice issues related to young people leaving care

It has previously been argued that the Staying Put pilots represent one means of young people having a longer period of time in which they can build strong peer relationships, which they may then be able to access for support after leaving care. Research on mentoring for care leavers has also recognised the role of peers, sometimes care leavers themselves (Clayden and Stein 2005), although the study concerned found wide variation across projects in the availability of mentors out of hours. However for those young people who have little or no support from peers or siblings, the availability of adults for support may be crucial.

Although there is little research concerning the availability of social workers for young care leavers, one study found that young people had problems accessing social work support, particularly that of a named worker (National Care Advisory Service 2009). Centrepoint (2006) provide floating support workers, who assist not only with practical skills but with the emotional demands of living independently. Another study found that young people valued immensely those social workers who kept in touch informally, after their case was closed or the social worker was no longer employed in the role (Ward *et al.* 2005).

Local authorities now have a duty to draw up a pathway plan for young people leaving care, which is intended to plan their route to independent living in all areas of their lives including education, accommodation, employment and health (Cocker and Allain 2008). It is a potentially useful tool in establishing the support needs of young people preparing

to leave care, and could be used to identify where they have support from siblings or peers, or where this could be developed. Unfortunately, research continues to indicate that young people are often not part of the process, or have no knowledge of the contents of their pathway plan (Centrepoint 2006, Children's Rights Director 2006, 2009b). It has also been found that pathway planning does not always involve sufficient assessment (National Care Advisory Service 2009).

Conclusion

The processes of becoming and remaining looked after, and leaving care, can severely affect looked after children's sibling and peer relationships. Initial losses are sustained, and are often followed by further losses which occur over time through long periods in care. Such losses are exacerbated by moving placement a number of times. Losses can be permanent, as in the case of siblings who are adopted. Multiple oppressions such as poverty, racism, ageism and disability can increase the negative impact of being looked after, and of leaving care, on children's relationships. Where children and young people have been consulted, their accounts have emphasised the vital importance of their sibling and peer relationships for support, well-being and a sense of identity both during and after leaving care.

The legal and policy context concerning looked after children demonstrates that ideas about children's attachments to adults have been influential in the drive for adoption as the best solution for permanency. This has had serious implications for looked after children, as one of the consequences of adoption is the severing of sibling relationships. The legal and policy framework has undergone great change in recent years, in an attempt to improve the lives and circumstances of looked after children. This has been accompanied by a growing awareness of the importance of sibling and peer relationships for looked after children. Practice initiatives have also reflected this, encompassing a variety of measures designed to improve the lives and relationships of

looked after children. Nevertheless, there is still much to be done, and the longer term effects of such initiatives are not yet known.

For looked after children, who stand to experience so much alteration and loss within their relationships, greater knowledge about the role of their relationships with each other from their own perspectives is of particular importance. This kind of knowledge may be crucial to a new understanding of children's priorities for a sense of identity, belonging, and well-being, as well as the ways in which their sibling and peer relationships contribute to this. Mapping the significance of looked after children's relationships, as well as the effects upon them of being in care, is needed to build on growing awareness of the importance of such relationships in this context. Such findings will not only assist in work with children currently looked after, but also with those who are leaving care.

There is currently insufficient research dedicated to understanding the complexity and nature of sibling and peer relationships for looked after children from their perspectives. More needs to be known about how children define siblings and friends, how they support each other, and what the consequences are for them of separation and loss within such relationships. The empirical research informing this thesis, comprising qualitative interviews with young people specifically about their sibling and peer relationships, aims to deepen knowledge and understanding of this issue, as well as contributing to developing policy and practice in the interests of looked after children.

Chapter Four

Theoretical and methodological approaches employed in researching the views of looked after young people

Introduction

This chapter will analyse the connection between the theoretical perspectives and methodologies employed within the empirical study, demonstrating how theoretical standpoints have shaped the research methods used throughout the research process. It will begin by elaborating the cross-cutting theoretical concepts which have provided a framework and a background to the thesis as a whole, and then move on to consider their influences on, and integration with, the empirical research process. It will be argued that a sociological approach to this research allowed for the accounts of young people to be privileged over those of adults, and that post structural and feminist insights were used to address issues of marginalisation and agency in relation to the research process. The tensions between the more structural approaches from within the sociology of childhood, and post structural approaches which begin to address issues of diversity and multiple oppressions, will be highlighted.

Chapter Three considered the implications of entering and remaining in care for children's relationships with siblings and peers. It explored what is known about the losses which can be sustained in such relationships through being in care, as well as the role of such relationships in the provision of identity, well-being and support both during and after leaving care. Finally, it illustrated that the sibling and peer relationships of looked after children have been under-theorised, contributing to a deficit of knowledge in the area. Chapter Four demonstrates the value of a participatory methodology in the study of these relationships, valuing young people's views and seeking to privilege their experiences and accounts throughout the research process. In seeking to employ a participatory methodology, account is also taken of post structural perspectives on the distribution of power, and the importance of involving young people

at all stages of the research process. Consistent with this approach, the use of grounded theory as a means of generating new knowledge from young people's accounts is examined.

The chapter will also acknowledge the position of the researcher as a social work practitioner, considering some of the influences of the personal, social and practice worlds on the researcher, and therefore also on the research. The relevance of existing knowledge on practitioner research will also be examined. The ethical issues which arose as part of the research process will be reviewed. It will be demonstrated that careful consideration was given to such issues at all stages, from the initial request for ethical approval from the university, through obtaining informed consent, to the development of child protection protocols within the focus groups and individual interviews. The ethical issues surrounding the conflicting roles of researcher and practitioner will also be considered. Finally, the chapter will present the processes of designing, executing and analysing the research, and the involvement of young people through the use of focus groups and individual interviews. Throughout, it will critically evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of the research process.

Epistemological underpinnings

The epistemological framework for this research draws on a range of key ideas from within the sociology of childhood, post structuralism, post modernism and feminism, in order to give due importance to the knowledge gained from participants in the study. The framework takes a sociological approach, understanding children as social actors who are able to demonstrate agency by making their own decisions or resisting those of adults. It also integrates post structural approaches, which argue for the voices of the few and the marginalised to be heard, and post modern feminist insights, which explore the effects of multiple oppressions and the dynamics of power. It is acknowledged that each perspective has strengths and limitations. It is argued that an epistemological

framework which operates within or draws from these key paradigms is essential to the development of a research model which takes account of looked after young people's positioning as a marginalised group in society, as well as engaging with them in order to research their views on their sibling and peer relationships.

A sociological framework

Using the sociology of childhood as a framework for the research enabled a view of children to be constructed which moves beyond the popular view of them as subordinate to and defined by adults. It allowed them to be seen instead as beings in their own right, with the ability and the right to comment on their lives and experiences. Many have by now argued for the consideration of children as more than simply adults-in-waiting (James and Prout 1997, John 2003, Walkerdine 2004), and accordingly the need to develop a model of research with children based on a sociological approach to children has been the subject of increasing discussion over the last fifteen years. Winter (2006) argues that the main body of recent research concerning the views of looked after children has been directed at their experiences as consumers of services such as education and health, and that greater attention in research should be paid to children's social relationships and cultures.

A sociological approach to research with children is therefore consistent with the theoretical imperatives stated in the research objectives for this study: to explore children's sibling and peer relationships from their own perspectives. It acknowledges that in certain situations, children's perspectives can yield more informative data than those of adults. They may even be "*epistemologically privileged ... in that they are better placed than adults to produce 'situated' knowledges that prioritize the importance of their everyday experiences*" (Balen *et al.* 2006: 30). Researching young people's perspectives on their sibling and peer relationships should enable greater understanding of their importance in the maintenance of well-being and identity, as well as the provision of support during and after leaving care. However, despite greater recognition

of the oppressions which affect children's lives, many sociological approaches continue to focus on the division between child and adulthood. Mayall, for example, argues that *"generation is key for understanding childhood and children's lives"* (2008: 109). Such a focus limits the usefulness of a purely sociological approach in understanding the lives of children who are further marginalised through being looked after.

Although a sociological approach has contributed much to an understanding of children as independent social actors (James *et al.* 1998, 2005, James and James 2004), it is still in its infancy with regard to the awareness of the diversity which exists amongst children and childhoods. However there is now recognition that childhood can be affected by divisions of age, class, sexuality and ethnicity (Boocock and Scott 2005), poverty, disability and gender, and acknowledging these factors better informs our understanding of children's different social worlds. This is combined with the realisation that children themselves provide the best means of understanding their experiences (Boocock and Scott 2005, Corsaro 1997).

Post structural and post modern insights

Dominant discourses relating to young people's inferiority to adults, interrogated to an extent through critical studies of childhood, can be further challenged through post structuralism. Post structuralism has been responsible for rejecting overarching explanations, (such as the idea that all children develop in ways which are universally applicable), which, in reinforcing specific and powerful discourses, have served to marginalise particular groups (Goodley *et al.* 2004). This is of direct relevance to researching the lives of looked after young people, who encounter multiple oppressions by virtue of their status not just as children in general, but also as looked after children.

Post structural approaches not only reject predominant, universal explanations, they also seek to emphasise everything which such explanations failed to address; every aspect of life which has become marginalised (Sarup 1993). Where structuralism

offered singularity of meaning and explanation, post structuralism allows for the possibility of multiple, diverse meanings. Similarly, post modern researchers do not consider there to be a single reality which can be known, rather they recognise that there are many perspectives, each with its individual reality (Alston and Bowles 2003). This allows for a privileging in theoretical terms of marginalised groups such as children, whose lives and experiences might otherwise have remained under-theorised.

Post structural approaches offer a means of identifying diverse voices in order to contribute to a theoretical discourse for looked after young people which is unique to their experiences of loss and change. They also facilitate analyses of the relationship between knowledge and power (Goodley *et al.* 2004). However, in using a post structural approach to explore the individual stories of looked after young people, there is a risk of losing their collective voice and common experiences of loss and separation. There are, therefore, tensions in synthesising post structuralism, which offers multiple explanations, and the sociology of childhood, which considers childhood as the source of structured oppression of children, within a framework for research.

Post modern feminist insights

The framework for this research also draws on feminist epistemological insights, which have some similarities with post structural approaches. Feminist standpoint epistemology has prioritised the voices of those who are less powerful (Devine and Heath 1999). This has echoes of a wider post structural approach, in *".. emphasise [ing] the perspective of those whose lives are shaped and constrained (or marginalised) by the dominant social order"* (Goodley *et al.* 2004:102). Indeed, some feminist researchers, in highlighting the unequal nature of power relationships, have seen post structuralism as being able to challenge prevailing ideas and the ways in which groups with less power are represented (Standing 1998). This is relevant to gaining an understanding of the lack of power encountered by looked after children.

There are parallels between post modern feminism and child focused sociological approaches, as both consider the position of marginalised groups, and are committed to redressing the adverse balance of power they experience. Feminist approaches to research have also challenged more dominant mainstream research ideas which have leaned towards the following of procedure and rules in order to achieve objective results, by suggesting that for research to be valuable it must move away from prescriptive approaches, towards more creative and imaginative approaches (Rennie 2000; Robinson 2000). However, there are limits to the establishment of parallels within women's and children's oppression (Scourfield 2003, Wyness 2006), which mean that post modern feminism cannot be representative of the multiple oppressions with which looked after children have to engage.

Methodological approaches

Using a participatory approach

As discussed previously, this research study was designed and carried out within a framework which prioritised young people's abilities to comment on their own lives (Mayall 2005). It drew on a sociological interpretation of children as competent social actors able to influence their own situations (James and James 2004, James *et al.* 2005). This influenced a key methodological aim, that of involving young people as fully as possible in the overall research process. The study set out to ensure that consultation and participation were paramount at every stage, from the initial contacts, through to the focus groups, and the individual interviews. Young people were given opportunities to opt in or out at any stage, to influence the research questions through the focus groups, and to have as much control over the interview process as possible.

It has been argued that a participatory approach may be able to redress the imbalance of power engendered by the adult – young person research relationship (McLeod 2007).

The participatory approach adopted in the study was based on the view that although a power imbalance could not be removed, as suggested by McLeod (2007), it could be addressed to some extent by involving young people as much as possible, and being mindful of power relations between researcher and participant. As an adult researcher, I was responsible not only for ensuring meaningful participation, but also for making sure that those taking part understood the purposes of the research, how it was to be used, and who would benefit. Thus I acknowledged the important role of social researchers in taking on the challenge of creating a 'space' in which children and young people can be both listened to and heard (O'Kane 2008).

Claims to participation of children in research have been interrogated and applied, and have been understood to range from manipulation, to tokenism, through to child-initiated research (Hart 1997). A participatory model of research with children challenges prevailing Eurocentric ideas that children acquire competence at specific age-defined stages, and that their rights are subject to a 'caretaking' role by adults (Archard 2004). Rather, it highlights the importance of children's rights within the research process:

> *"The children's rights agenda has made a big impact over recent years, and many researchers now aspire to 'enable' children to exercise their rights to influence the structures that govern their lives."* (Kay *et al.* 2009: 161).

With the growth of a more child-focused sociological approach to research (Winter 2006), the levels of participation have increased; and it is now more common to find examples of children acting either as consultants or as researchers (Wyness 2006).

This research study sought to engage with ideas about children's participation, or lack of participation, in research. It aimed to privilege children's accounts, providing opportunities for them to describe their lives from their own perspectives (Boocock and Scott 2005), by allowing them to influence both the process and the content of the interviews. It aspired to the creation of a more equal working relationship between the researcher and the researched, rather than one in which the researcher had power over

the participant (Wyness 2006). Nevertheless, the unalterable nature of the unequal power relations between the adult researcher and the young people as research participants was kept in mind throughout.

Grounded theory

Consistent with an approach that privileges children's knowledge, rather than making assumptions as to the knowledge which will be produced; this research used grounded theory as a means of understanding and interpreting the data. First propounded by Glaser and Strauss (1967), grounded theory is based on the premise that theory can be formed from the data itself. Their premise was that grounded theory encouraged much closer links between the data and the theory, and could therefore *"help forestall the opportunistic use of theories that have dubious fit and working capacity"* (Glaser and Strauss 1967: 4). Such emergent theorising is therefore more relevant and more usable. Grounded theory also allows for the ability to continually modify and refine a developing theory. The development of theory is an ongoing process whereby systematic data analysis serves to fine tune the theory (Grieg *et al.* 2007).

Grounded theory is therefore *"a general methodology for developing theory that is grounded in data systematically gathered and analyzed. Theory evolves during actual research, and it does this through continuous interplay between analysis and data collection"* (Strauss and Corbin 1994: 273). The intention was for this analysis to generate concepts in this way from the data provided in participants' accounts (Corbin and Strauss 2008).

Combining the roles of practitioner and researcher

I enrolled as a PhD student having previously been a practising local authority social worker, and during my time of study have moved to work as an independent social worker. Both social work roles have been within the field of children and families. My position as a known social worker facilitated access to the local authority for which I had

worked, therefore this was a valuable, if pragmatic, means of gaining a foothold in the organisation; and also engendered some credibility amongst the practitioners to whom I was known. I needed to be aware that now I had a different perspective as a researcher, but was returning to a local authority in which I had previously been a social worker. Being a partial insider, as well as a practitioner in the field, had both advantages and disadvantages. The position of the insider researcher has been described as beneficial in terms of having useful knowledge concerning the cultures and informal organisational structures; however it also carries with it a risk of making assumptions based on insider knowledge (Coghlan and Brannick 2010).

While conducting the study, I was aware of the need to reconcile the dual roles of professional and researcher, to discover how to *"attain a productive marriage between the systematic intellectual enquiry which characterizes research and the tough-minded realities of life in social care agencies ..."* (Fuller and Petch 1995: 3). It has been argued that the roles of practitioner and researcher have congruent values, in that research and social work practice both contend with addressing issues of power and empowerment (Trinder 2000). The Code of Practice for Social Care Workers (General Social Care Council 2002), which is concerned with protecting and respecting the rights of service users, also influences the role of a researcher with potentially vulnerable participants. Having prior practice experience as a social worker with looked after young people proved invaluable in informing the research objectives and questions. However, there are challenges in joining together the roles of practitioner and researcher. The boundaries can be blurred, to a point where it is unclear when one is acting as a researcher, and when as a practitioner (Fox *et al.* 2007). Practitioners as researchers also need to be aware of the impact of interviewing those they know as clients in an existing professional relationship (Fox *et al.* 2007).

The following examples illustrate some of the issues which arose from my dual roles. As a practitioner within the organisation, I had some prior knowledge of two brothers

who took part in the interviews, as I had acted as temporary social worker to one, as well as to a third brother who was not part of the study. This meant that the family circumstances were known to me, raising two issues which I needed to account for. The first was the potential effect on the research interaction of the additional / external knowledge I possessed, knowledge which had also been influenced by social work processes and interaction with other professionals. The second was the potential effect on the research relationship of having known a participant in a social work role. The two brothers in question chose to be interviewed together and with a friend. I was very conscious during the interview that I should only refer to prior knowledge which was relevant to the research discussion. I also endeavoured to treat the young person I had worked with the same way as the other two young men in the session, by not assuming any kind of prior connection between us.

An additional dimension to the practitioner / researcher duality was the question of which role I occupied while involved in research with participants. The position I occupied was slightly different from that of a practitioner researcher as I was not working as a social worker by the time I registered for PhD study. I therefore presented myself to the young people as a researcher, who had previously worked with young people in care. The members of the second focus group asked me as the researcher to account for my motivation in conducting the study, including the possibility of financial gain. The group members wanted to satisfy themselves that my interests were not purely financial or career related.

In being both a social worker and a researcher I have a head and a heart in both worlds - I have the intellectual interest and desire to analyse and extract meaning from the research process, yet I also have the drive to translate what I find into practice. I see before me research participants, interview situations, data, and coding. I hold in my mind snapshots of children, talking with passion, anger, despair, affection and hope about their experiences and their relationships.

The story which is told through any research interaction is also a unique account formed from the relationship between the researcher and participant, and I bring not only professional interest and intellectual enquiry, but also personal feelings to the research. I began the study with personal knowledge of children and young people, as a parent of three children. As the study progressed, and my personal circumstances changed, I have seen my children learn to negotiate new familial relationships, firstly with the children of their father's second partner, and then later with the adult children of my own new partner. This has given additional personal perspective to an enquiry into the meaning and significance of young people's changing sibling and peer relationships. It is also likely to have influenced the research process to some degree, in making me more aware of the complex familial relationships which children and young people may have with each other (not always of their own choosing), as well as the ways in which they make sense of such relationships and negotiate change within them. The influence of the researcher on the research process in this way has been explained by Fook as follows:

> "Being reflexive involves a recognition of how we ourselves, as whole people, influence the situations and contexts in which we interact." (Fook 2002: 130).

As a practitioner and a researcher I undertook to bring together two very different worlds. I brought personal and practice knowledge to combine with the skills of a researcher. I undertook to discover the views and experiences of marginalised young people, and to represent them to others. Every effort was made to ensure that the participants were not adversely affected, and that they understood that they would potentially be helping other young people in similar situations.

Ethical issues and challenges

Ethical approval – departmental and local authority

The research proposal underwent stringent procedures before being submitted to the local authority. Arrangements were in place within the School of Health and Social Studies for ethical scrutiny and approval of research projects. The research proposal was submitted to a cross-departmental review conducted through the Faculty of Social Sciences, and reporting to the Faculty Research Committee. Permission to conduct the research was then requested from the Director of Social Services of the local authority in question, by an access letter (Appendix 1) which contained a brief summary of the nature, aims and objectives of the project, as well as comments by looked after young people from previous research studies illustrating the importance of sibling and peer relationships. I was required to meet with a District Children's Services Manager, before being granted permission to approach local teams within the local authority. I then conducted presentations to all three of the local area teams, alongside seeking co-operation from Field Work Managers responsible for the area teams, as well as their permission to approach social workers to enquire about potential participants. There were then several stages which I needed to go through before accessing participants. Individual social workers were approached, and the importance of ethical sensibility was highlighted in discussion with them, in order to ensure that no children and young people who were currently experiencing traumatic circumstances were approached.

Purposive sampling (Alderson 2004) was used to try and ensure that the parameters for inclusion allowed for the representation of children from different ethnic backgrounds, with different care histories, disabled children, and those who were unaccompanied asylum seekers. This involved approaching as many social workers as possible, and identifying potential participants in discussion with them. Every effort was made to achieve representation through ongoing discussions with social workers within all the

area teams; however this was not always possible. For instance three young people from ethnic minorities, one of whom was an unaccompanied asylum seeker, spoke to me about the research, but decided not to take part. Prior to the study, I had hoped to recruit a total of twenty-five participants aged between ten and eighteen years. The eventual sample consisted of eighteen participants aged between twelve and nineteen years. The age range was extended to include a young person who lived with one participant and who wanted to take part. Social workers tended to put forward older young people; therefore it was not as easy as I had anticipated to recruit younger children. I had also hoped to interview children with physical impairments; however the social workers for the children's disability team were not able to identify any young people they felt it would be appropriate to approach. In addition to the original purposive sampling, some participants were also recruited through the focus group. I had initially made contact with the focus group members through an adult in the local children's services, who was involved with them through their participation in existing young people's consultation forums. In these cases, contact was made directly with the young people, rather than through social workers. There were no potential participants whom it was felt necessary to exclude from the interviews. Had there been any concerns about the welfare of any of the young people taking part, this would have been discussed with them, and contact made with the appropriate adults if necessary. In the case of those recruited through the existing consultation forums, it was recognised that there was no prior information available from social workers; however if concerns had been identified during the course of the focus groups or individual interviews, this would have been discussed with the young person, and the most appropriate adult with whom to make contact would have been identified.

Maintaining confidentiality throughout the research project

Good practice in terms of confidentiality includes taking measures to secure the data, ensure anonymity within it, and to be particularly careful of sensitive personal data

(Alderson and Morrow 2004). Assurances of confidentiality were made throughout the research process. An information handling agreement produced by the local authority was signed, ensuring that the research material would be appropriately stored, and audiotapes destroyed following completion of the study. Young people were advised as to the limits and the nature of confidentiality within the study, including ensuring all identifying aspects of the material were made anonymous before being seen by anyone other than myself. The research agreement (contained within the interview leaflets – Appendices 3 and 4) which was signed by every participant, covered the limits of confidentiality, with an explanation that there were certain circumstances under which confidentiality could not be maintained. These circumstances would be in the event that the participant or another young person was felt to be at risk of harm. It was also emphasised that in such a situation I would need to talk to someone else about the concern, but that I would endeavour to talk to the young person about it first. These precautions, while necessary, were not called upon as no such concerns emerged during the research process. The research agreement was also verbally explained before the young person agreed to take part, and the limits of confidentiality revisited at the start of the focus group or individual interview. The same protocols were used for the focus group and the individual interviews. In addition, a 'sealed box' was used in accordance with the method developed by Punch (2002a) to take account of issues such as confidentiality and anonymity, for young people to write down problems they were not prepared to discuss (Punch 2002a). This was done as part of a plan to deal with any sensitive personal issues which might have come out in the group.

Informed consent

Alderson (1995) has argued that research involving children must start from the standpoint that adults (whether researchers or not) hold a position of authority over children. It is critical that researchers are aware of the tremendous amount of influence and power adults have over children, who typically are compliant with adults:

"Whilst the intent of qualitative research interviews is to obtain the perspectives and experiences of child participants, paradoxically the very fact of the interview has an influencing and mediating effect on the child's 'voice'." (Mishna *et al.* 2004: 463).

Adult researchers, therefore, also have a further responsibility; those with more power can play an important role in enabling those with less power to be heard (Morrow 1999a). The interview can be understood as:

"... a process of negotiation and partial information-sharing as two individuals with an unequal power-base edge towards a greater awareness of the others' perspective." (McLeod 2007: 281).

It has been found that children may in some circumstances not have the ability to avoid answering questions (Cree *et al.* 2002), and the need to remind children of their right to choose not to answer questions has been highlighted (Stalker and Connors 2003). Consequently, great care needs to be taken to ensure that children are willing participants, and that the sessions acknowledge and minimise the effect of the power relationship. There are clearly responsibilities inherent in questioning children, particularly if these are vulnerable children who have experienced distressing events in their lives, however as Alderson has argued (1995), the hoped-for benefits of new knowledge in the area may justify asking them to participate. This is of particular relevance to the study, which was concerned with consulting young people who were, or who had been, looked after, and were therefore potentially vulnerable.

Opinion varies as to whether 'assent' or 'consent' should be obtained from children to take part in research. It has been argued that for children who are unable to express informed consent, combining the use of assent through looks and gestures with researcher reflexivity can be sufficient to allow children to take part in research (Cocks 2006). This approach, however, has inherent risks as the researcher may not interpret the child's actions correctly, or may not have sufficient time to build a relationship necessary to such interpretation (Kay *et al.* 2009). Guidance from UNICEF on the

participation of children in research emphasises that parental consent is 'not an adequate standard in light of the rights of the child' (UNICEF 2002: 5). Assent is a problematic concept in some respects as it implies that the child taking part must understand that they have a choice to participate and to withdraw, and that they know what their role is in the research, and what will be done with the data (Grieg *et al.* 2007), although they do not have to understand the reason or purpose behind the research itself (Montgomery 1997). In some ways the use of assent prevents parents from being the sole providers of consent on a child's behalf; however it also assumes the inability of a child to comprehend the reasons behind a research study.

One model of research participation is predicated on the concept of children as 'becomings', and requires that parents must provide consent, and indeed that they even have the potential to override a child's wish to participate (Butler and Williamson 1994, Goodenough *et al*. 2003). In this scenario, adults may impede the ability and the right of children to express their views (Lloyd-Smith and Tarr 2000). Although children undoubtedly can be vulnerable and require those with parental responsibility to protect them by exercising caution on their behalf, the danger of this approach is that children's rights continue to be subsumed within an adult agenda. Researchers with experience of negotiating with gate-keeping systems note that not all systems have adapted to take account of more recent trends in understanding children in terms of both policy and service provision:

> *"We are most certainly not suggesting such systems should be bypassed, since researchers must be accountable for ethical considerations, and a mechanism for monitoring standards independent of the researcher must be evident. Some children, especially those living independently of parents, whose parents are absent or deemed 'incompetent', may indeed need to have their interests safeguarded in some way by an adult. However, adults who do not share a participatory rights approach deny children access to the participatory model."* (Balen *et al.* 2006: 44-45).

Having highlighted the existence of parents *"deemed 'incompetent'"* (Balen *et al.* 2006: 45), the question of such parents as marginalised adults arises. In the field of children and families work in particular, there can be strong tensions between children's interests and parents' rights (Lupton and Nixon 1999). Care must therefore also be taken not to further disenfranchise such adults by dispensing with their consent altogether. This dilemma is illustrated by ethical consent guidelines produced by the National Children's Bureau:

> *"While we believe that children themselves must give their consent to participate, we recognise that it may be necessary to ask permission from parents or other gatekeepers to approach the child. This is more complex when the parent does not reside with the child. Our guideline is to seek this permission from the resident parents and inform non-resident parents who have substantial contact with their children."* (National Children's Bureau 2003: 3).

Such an approach prioritises a child-centred view, but also marginalises the group of parents who do not live with their children. Kay *et al.* explore the problematic area of adult versus child consent from yet another angle, posing the question:

> *"As researchers, how can we work with children in ways that recognize both their own autonomy and the importance, to them, of their relationships with parents and other adults?"* (Kay *et al.* 2009: 19).

This may be particularly apposite when considering the participation of looked after children who do not live with their parents. This study recognised the need to balance the rights of both children and parents. While acknowledging the potential marginalisation of parents of looked after children, it also recognised the ability of participants to give informed consent. Where children were aged under sixteen, parents were first sent or given a card requesting their permission to approach their child to provide them with information about the study. The emphasis was on the children's right to consent or refuse participation in the study. Once parental permission (for those

under sixteen) to approach them had been given, and following agreement by the social worker, young people were then approached by letter and a leaflet explaining the purposes of the research. Potential participants aged sixteen or over were approached directly, without the prior permission of parents. Two slightly different leaflets were prepared (Appendices 3 and 4), to account for the potential range of age, comprehension, literacy, and familiarity with English language amongst young people.

The leaflets were carefully designed, with a logo 'Together Yet Apart' which sought to capture the nature of the enquiry about sibling and peer relationships. Guidelines for successful leaflets include the use of language which a child can understand, narrow columns, a logo and a question and answer format (Alderson and Morrow 2004). A follow up phone call was made, and where young people were interested in taking part, an initial visit was made to answer questions and to request their agreement, alongside ensuring that they understood the nature and the purpose of the research. It was emphasised that the young people had the right, at any stage, to withdraw from the process. Some young people decided not to take part at that point; others wanted time to think about taking part, and subsequently chose not to. This was a lengthy but necessary process of identifying participants, and ensuring they had control over the process.

Following the initial stages of obtaining consent, (in which those aged under sixteen were approached through social workers and parents, and those over sixteen were approached either through social workers, or through existing consultation groups), potential participants were treated equally and given the same choices. Those who agreed to participate signed an agreement contained within the leaflet. The agreement gave them the opportunity to specify where and when they would like to meet, what information they would like to receive at the end of the project, and whether they would like to be part of the dissemination process. The research agreement also contained a reminder that they could still withdraw from the process at any time. Through ticking

boxes on the agreement, participants could choose to request a copy of a report detailing some of the findings of the study, and express interest in being part of the dissemination process. The leaflet contained a description of the purpose, aims and proposed use of the research, and explained the nature and limitations of confidentiality for child protection purposes. As a researcher with children I also had a current Criminal Records Bureau enhanced disclosure.

Ongoing consent - renewing ethical parameters

The importance of gaining ongoing consent throughout a research project has been demonstrated by Cree *et al.* (2002). This includes giving young people control over the process by reminding them of their right to end the interview at any time (Stalker and Connors 2003). Ethical parameters were renewed during the study, as those taking part were reminded at the start of the interview that they could stop at any time. However, as I was aware that young people might not find it easy to say so, I also responded to potential verbal cues, as demonstrated in the following excerpt:

Mark: *"I need the toilet."*

Kerry: *"And me."*

Researcher: *"Yes? Does that mean that you want the toilet and to come back, or does that mean you've had enough?"*
Mark: *"Had enough."*

Rewarding participants – an ethical dilemma

Paying children as research participants is a contentious issue, and opinion is divided as to whether young people should be recompensed financially for taking part (Cree *et al.* 2002). Concerns have been expressed that paying young people to take part may amount to coercion, or that having been paid, they may feel they have to give more information than they originally wanted to (Alderson and Morrow 2004). However one study which initially intended to only pay young care leavers once, eighteen months into a research project, found that the adults working with them saw this as taking advantage

of the young people and not affording them respect (Wigfall and Cameron 2006). Such concerns were carefully considered in the planning stages of the study. I decided eventually that all those taking part should be recompensed in the same way that adults taking part in research are recompensed (Alderson and Morrow 2004). This decision was made on the basis that in keeping with a sociological approach recognising children as social actors in their own right, making a payment would acknowledge the important contribution made by each young person to the study.

Each young person who participated in either a focus group or a full interview (the length of interview was determined by them) was given a payment of £20 to thank them for their contribution. Within the focus group the issue of possible coercion did arise, as some group members challenged the basis on which the money was given, and were keen to establish that they could, if they wished, simply arrive, collect the money and leave. At this point group members had the choice of being given the money and leaving, or staying until the end, however all of them chose to stay and take part in the session.

The pre-fieldwork phase

Developing the research objectives and questions

Using the grounded theory approach outlined previously (Glaser and Strauss 1967, Corbin and Strauss 2008), the research objectives were directed towards a process of enquiry and investigation which would extend existing knowledge related to young people's relationships and experiences. The objectives were constructed within a framework which recognised young people's marginalised status, and sought to privilege their views.

The main research objectives were:

- To investigate and contextualise the meaning and significance for looked after children of their relationships with siblings and peers, from their own perspectives.

- To explore the ways in which forms of oppression affect the meaning and significance of looked after children's relationships.

- To contribute to the knowledge base of looked after children's perspectives on their relationships with siblings and peers.

- To enable looked after children to contribute to the debates about their lives.

The objectives were then developed into questions, focused on young people's relationships with siblings and peers. The research questions specified prior to the fieldwork were:

- What importance do looked after children attach to their relationships with their siblings and peers?

- How do looked after children conceptualise these relationships in the context of their life histories?

- What understanding do looked after children have of the ways in which these relationships have been sustained, promoted, constrained or severed through the processes of being looked after?

- To what extent have looked after children felt able to express agency, either through resisting or altering adult decisions concerning their relationships with siblings and peers?

- What do looked after children view as the consequences of significant relationships with siblings and peers being altered?

- What are looked after children's future expectations regarding the continuation and the nature of significant relationships with siblings and peers, and what do they say they need in order to sustain or promote them into the future?

These questions remained at the forefront of the research throughout, to ensure that the views and experiences of young people remained paramount.

The fieldwork phase

Focus groups

In keeping with a grounded theory approach in which theoretical sampling is an ongoing process (Glaser and Strauss 1967, Corbin and Strauss 2008), the research objectives and questions were initially validated by means of a focus group made up of young people either currently or previously looked after. The focus group was used to explore the topic and to ensure the research questions were clearly outlined (Stewart *et al.* 2007). The research questions were subsequently re-visited within a second focus group, to ensure their relevance to the lives of the young people in question. Focus groups can be of value both as a means of exploratory research on a topic, and as a confirmatory tool at a later stage of a research project (Stewart *et al.* 2007). In terms of research with children, the use of focus groups with children prior to developing a questionnaire can help to check out children's understanding, and avoid the use of adult-centric questions (Scott 2008).

The intention behind the focus group was to involve the young people in the research process as much as possible. Each focus group was conducted according to a plan, which was drawn up to include the content, and the aims, of each session. The first focus group plan can be found in Appendix 2. The original plan was to have three sessions, the first to obtain feedback on the research questions, the second to gain the group's perspective on interviews undertaken thus far and to begin to plan for dissemination, and the third to discuss emerging findings and to prepare a presentation for their dissemination. Unfortunately it was not possible to hold the third focus group, as I had to take a necessary but lengthy period of suspension from the PhD study due to personal circumstances. On resuming registration I felt it was no longer appropriate to arrange a final focus group due to the length of time which had elapsed.

The first focus group involved six young people, four female and two male, recruited through the local children's services, and, who, as previously identified, were for the most part already involved in some kind of young people's consultation forum. This helped to ensure the compatibility of group members, which is important to a successful focus group (Stewart *et al.* 2007). I met with group members to provide them with information about the study in order for them to decide whether to take part. All but one of the focus group participants also chose to take part in an individual interview.

The group met at a local authority conference venue, for sessions of approximately two hours, which were audio recorded with the consent of all participants. The first session introduced the young people to the concept of their role as research consultants, and then proceeded to consider ideas and opinions around relationships and their relative importance. Cards representing different related and non-related people were ranked by the group according to their importance to a child, and then cards with statements to define the relationship were placed next to the cards.

Those who were ranked most highly were mothers, brothers, sisters, and friends. Step-mothers, step-fathers and step-sisters, as well as half-brothers and half-sisters, were ranked lowest in importance by the group, closely followed by social workers. Step-brothers were ranked at both ends of the scale by different participants, as were foster carers and residential workers. Uncles, aunts, fathers and cousins were ranked mostly at the lower end of the scale, and foster brothers and sisters ranged from the top to the middle of the scale. Friends were linked with statements such as *"We know about each other"*, *"We look after each other"*, *"We stand up for each other"*, and *"The same things have happened to us"*. Brothers were linked with the statement *"We stand up for each other"*, and sisters were linked with *"We stand up for each other"*, *"They are like me"*, *"We look after each other"*, and *"The same things have happened to us"*.

A sealed box was used for participants to record anonymously any comments they wanted to make at the end of the session. Two participants wrote *"It was good"*, one

wrote *"i [sic] appreciate the £20"*, one wrote *"I thnk* [sic] *the session was good. I think that the next one will be better as everyone will know what to expect"*, one wrote *"it was a great night! It was nice to learn about others views and to me [sic] you"*, and one wrote *"I enjoyed it. I though [sic] the session went well. Just as long as you had enough information from all of us"*. The comments demonstrated that the participants seemed to benefit from the session. In terms of the research questions, the focus group provided confirmation of the importance of brothers, sisters and friends as well as adults for children and young people in care.

The second focus group, comprising four boys (one of whom had not been part of the first group) and a girl, took place following the completion of nine of the research interviews. The value of separating focus groups by gender due to the different communication styles of boys and girls has been argued by Scott (2008). While it would not have been realistic to try and achieve this in the focus groups for the study, it was noticeable that the gender imbalance in the second group changed the group dynamics, and it proved more difficult to get the group members, especially the boys, to engage with the research issues. This was reflected in one of the comments from the sealed box: *"I thought it want [sic] really well considering the lads where [sic] stupid bar 1 [sic]"*. However another comment was positive: *"I feel confident know [sic] and for this being the first time I was only a bit nervous"*. It should also be noted that the addition of a new member may have changed the overall dynamic of the session; however this was done in an attempt to be inclusive, following a request from group members who shared their placement with the new member.

Despite these challenges, positive ideas emerged from the session. The group considered the themes from the first meeting, and was advised of the emerging findings, which they felt were important. The group members then produced a list of people and organisations that they felt should be informed, and discussed various means of informing them. Their list included anyone connected with social services, foster carers,

residential workers, kids (as group members termed them) and voluntary organisations. They suggested the use of (amongst others) leaflets, letters, posters, magazines, conferences and the internet as various means of disseminating the findings. Several group members expressed an interest in a third focus group meeting to plan for dissemination of the findings.

Both focus groups proved invaluable in confirming and directing the previously drafted research questions. The first focus group highlighted several important areas, two of which were the importance of knowing about, standing up for, and sharing experiences with siblings and friends, and the wide range of importance which young people attached to their relationships with siblings, half siblings, step siblings, cousins, friends and adults. This suggested that the research questions were appropriate, as well as directing the enquiry towards relationships with all children, not just full siblings and friends. The second focus group, conducted half way through the fieldwork, provided confirmation that the emerging findings were considered relevant by looked after young people, and that the research questions continued to be appropriate. It also generated useful information concerning the young people's perceptions of who should be informed of the research findings and by what means. It is anticipated that this will help to direct dissemination of the findings.

Recruiting participants

The study recruited eighteen young people looked after by one local authority, aged between twelve and nineteen, of whom nine were female and nine were male. Sixteen were of White British origin, one was of African Caribbean origin, and one was of White British and Asian origin. All had spent at least one year in the care of the local authority. I was not able to interview any children or young people prior to their entry into care. Consequently it was not possible to do a 'before and after' type of analysis of the impact of entering care on sibling and peer relationships. Instead, I had to confine myself to their accounts of the impact of entering, living in, and leaving care on their relationships.

Eleven participants were in foster placements (of which one was with a grandparent), one was in a small residential placement, three were in semi-independent living and three had left care. The semi-independent placements were contained within one staffed unit, in which the young people were encouraged to develop skills in preparation for independent living.

Brief profiles of individual participants setting out some detail of their sibling and peer networks as well as some background to their care entry are contained in the participant profiles (Appendix 5). The profiles are intended to provide some background and context to the individual stories, as well as giving an overview of the many and varied sibling and peer relationships of the young people in the study. The table of study participants on the following page lists the young people in the order in which they were interviewed.

Name	M/F	Ethnic origin	Disability	Age at inter-view	Placement type	Age entered care
1. Jade	F	White British	Learning disabled	19 yrs	Foster care with Nicky	6 yrs
2. Nicky	F	White British		17 yrs	Foster care with Jade	11 yrs
3. David (sib of Shaun)	M	White British		17 yrs	Semi independent small group home	13 yrs approx
4. Shaun (sib of David)	M	White British		16 yrs	As above with David	12 yrs approx
5. Reece	M	White British		16 yrs	As above with David	2 yrs
6. Johnny (sib of Stuart)	M	White British	Learning disabled	15 yrs	Foster care	5 yrs approx
7. Hayley	F	White British		17 yrs	Bed and breakfast with son (left care)	15 yrs
8. Kelly (sib of Tom)	F	White British		16 yrs	Foster care out of city	7 yrs
9. Debbie	F	African Caribbean		18 yrs	House alone (left care)	13 yrs
10. Shelley	F	White British		17 yrs	Foster care - grandmother	15 yrs
11. Stuart	M	White British		18 yrs	Foster care	6 yrs
12. Rebecca	F	White British		18 yrs	Flat alone (left care)	6 yrs
13. Tom (sib of Kelly)	M	White British		12 yrs	Foster care	5 yrs
14. Daniel (sib of Mark and Kerry)	M	White British / Asian		16 yrs	Small group home out of city	13 yrs approx
15. Andrew (sib of Sophie)	M	White British		13 yrs	Foster care with Sophie	4 yrs
16. Sophie (sib of Andrew)	F	White British		14 yrs	Foster care with Andrew	5 yrs
17. Mark (sib of Kerry)	M	White British	ADHD	12 yrs	Foster care with Kerry	3 yrs approx
18. Kerry (sib of Mark)	F	White British		15 yrs	Foster care with Mark	6 yrs approx

Fig. 2. Details of Study Participants

Individual and group interviews or 'research discussions'

Familiar research settings, in which young people outnumber the researcher where possible, have been identified as key aspects of conducting research with children (Boocock and Scott 2005), which go some way towards equalising the power relations involved. For this research study, the young people chose whether to be interviewed at the university, or at their home or accommodation. Other research has found that some children find a group setting easier for an interview (Alderson and Morrow 2004), or may benefit from being able to interact with peers on common topics (Freeman and Mathison 2009), whereas others prefer the privacy of the individual interview (Punch 2002a). Therefore where possible, participants were also given the choice of being interviewed alone, with siblings or with friends. Two were interviewed with friends, three with a combination of friends and siblings, and four with siblings. While interviewing young people with siblings or in friendship groups may have allowed some voices to predominate, it also provided insights into the dynamics of sibling and peer relationships within those groups.

The interviews were audio recorded with participants' permission, on the understanding that they would only be listened to by me and whoever transcribed the interviews, and would only be used for the purposes of recording and analysing data. One young person refused permission for the interview to be audio-taped; therefore data collection in that case consisted of notes taken during the interview, and notes taken from memory afterwards. Permission was requested from the young people to read their files before the discussion took place. The purpose of this was to ensure that I would not need to ask them to repeat potentially distressing information about their past history during the discussion. This was not intended to be a means of verification, as it was recognised that each participant had their own valid version of events. The discussion was preceded by a general introduction to re-establish the aims and parameters of the study, including issues of child protection and confidentiality. In a few cases I could not access the files, and had to take extra care over the questions I asked during the interview in case they brought up sensitive issues.

The use of appropriate research methods

There has been much debate concerning the use of 'child friendly' research methods with young people (Punch 2002a,b, Fraser 2004, Kellett and Ding 2004). Fraser has argued that:

> *"... 'child friendly' methods are negotiated compromises that allow communication between the different conceptual outlooks of children and young people on the one hand, and those of researchers on the other ... There is nothing inherently or essentially 'child-friendly' about such techniques; they are all contingent to the frames of cultural reference of researchers and participants. Such techniques are 'participant-friendly' rather than 'child-friendly'. "* (Fraser 2004: 25).

There is a growing use of more flexible qualitative research methods in research with children, including the emphasis on activities which they enjoy and are able to carry out (Boocock and Scott 2005). The 'mosaic' approach allows for a choice of methods which are visual and verbal, such as photographs and tours initiated by the children, mapping using photographs or drawing, and role play (Clark and Moss 2001, Clark and Statham 2005). Other research studies conducted with children in the areas of both health and social services have used aspects of Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) techniques (O'Kane 2000, Punch 2002a,b), which have included methods such as stimulus material like video clips, problem pages and common phrases, as well as task-based activities such as spider diagrams and charts. PRA techniques were originally devised to help people in rural areas with limited literacy or verbal skills express their views, and have inspired the creation of methods which help participants to talk about complex research questions (Christensen and James 2008). Methods need to be able to facilitate the telling of each individual story (Grieg *et al.* 2007), which means acknowledging that individuals will not all be comfortable with the same medium, or want to tell their story in the same way. Effective methods can be seen as tools which mediate in the communication between researchers and child informants (Christensen and James

2008). For this study, I chose to use participant friendly (Fraser 2004), flexible research methods, following Punch (2002b), who has demonstrated the importance of using a variety of methods that lessen power differentials by allowing young people time to think about their responses.

All techniques were used selectively to take account of the wishes of individual participants. The emphasis in each discussion with participants was on a process of building rapport, followed by a dialogue during which a narrative of their life and experiences was jointly constructed between researcher and participant. The interview topic schedule (Appendix 6), utilised a semi-structured approach, encompassing three areas: coming into care, the present time, and leaving care, designed as an *"aide-memoire of themes to cover"* (Letherby 2003: 89). Participants were then offered choices of spider diagrams (O'Kane 2000, Punch 2002a) containing a series of concentric circles which were used to identify degrees of closeness within significant sibling and peer relationships; or road maps, which were used to facilitate visual representations of young people's experiences. The latter, adapted from a general social work technique, and used mainly with the younger participants, involved drawing a road from the point of care entry to the present time, with houses representing the places where they had lived. This helped to facilitate discussion of siblings and peers whom young people had lived with, as well as of relationships which they had lost. Both the spider diagram and the road map worked well as tools for generating discussion.

Most of the young people chose to keep their road maps at the end of the interview. Although these could have provided extra data for the study, the stance taken was that the young person could choose to retain data which they had created (MacNaughton and Smith 2005). Extra materials, as well as creating flexibility within the interview situation, can also be of use if a young person needs help to move onto a different area of discussion (Stalker and Connors 2003), therefore the interview topic schedule (Appendix 6) also included short statements similar to vignettes (Letherby 2003), and

sentences for completion (Kellett and Ding 2004). These proved useful with several participants, although in one interview, where the young person gave very short answers, even using these methods did not help to develop the dialogue. Encountering participants who say little during an interview can be a common difficulty (Corbin and Strauss 2008), and it can be necessary to end the interview prematurely but positively (Alderson and Morrow 2004). Although I did choose to end the interview after a short time, afterwards I felt that due to the ease of establishing rapport in other interviews, I had not given sufficient consideration to what to do if this did not happen.

The need to present information in a way which takes account of the pace and abilities of the participant has been highlighted with regard to interviewing young people with learning disabilities (Stalker and Connors 2003). These issues were carefully considered in relation to both participants with learning disabilities. Although Jade was able to take part in a conversation, Johnny found this more difficult, therefore during his interview I used pictures of faces symbolising different emotions such as happy, sad, and worried. These served as starting points for discussion concerning how he felt about his siblings.

The nature of what amounted to a research discussion, rather than a fixed interview schedule, facilitated a relaxed atmosphere in which participants felt able to talk about what they wanted to, and on their terms. It also enabled conversation to flow naturally, and rapport to be quickly and easily established between researcher and participant. The comments of one participant demonstrated where this had been achieved:

> **Jade:** *"I think we've actually talked, haven't we, and not actually realised that that [recorder] was on, it's like talking to friends and that ain't it?"*

A relaxed atmosphere was achieved in most of the interviews, although this had its challenges, for instance at the start of the interview with David, Shaun and Reece, held at the university, they were distracted by watching and commenting on girls walking past the window outside. I decided to lower the blind in order to refocus their attention on the

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interview. With hindsight this could have been interpreted as an assertion of power over the participants.

At the end of each interview, I ensured that the close of the discussion included a focus on the present time, and that the young person's positive achievements were emphasised as part of this process. Each young person was thanked for their contribution, and was given a follow-up leaflet specifically designed for the study, also detailing sources of external help and support (Appendix 7). They were reminded that they could contact me if they wanted to follow up on issues concerning the interview.

Narrative insights into participants' accounts

The interview schedule was used flexibly, beginning either with discussion of the present day or entry into care, according to the preference of participants. This technique has been demonstrated by Fraser (2004), who considers narrative interviewing to be characterised by the selective use, rather than the tyranny, of a topic based schedule, in which the interviewer is not governed by the schedule. The use of this technique helped to enable young people to choose the start and end point of their story. The use of a narrative approach in this form also provided insights into understanding the ways in which the young people constructed their accounts. Interview participants have been found to use narrative as a means of retelling their life in different ways or for different audiences, as demonstrated by Treacher and Katz:

> *"Narratives answer the questions: 'How did I get here?'; 'Why and what am I doing here?'; 'Where am I going?'; and also 'To which group do I belong?' 'Where do I fit into the broader picture?' 'What am I allowed to say about myself?'"*
> (Treacher and Katz 2001: 22).

The young people in this study were asked to talk about events and experiences which had occurred over many years, sometimes from a young age, and about which they often had limited recollection or information. Therefore in the process of telling their

story, they often had to make sense of their past, as well as looking to the future. Creating a narrative enabled them to reference their lives in terms of what had happened, as well as what might happen in the future:

"A narrative is a way of presenting human actions and events in a meaningful structure. Telling stories is a process of creating meaning from one's past experiences as well as creating meaning for the future." (Grieg *et al.* 2007: 144).

Using a topic schedule rather than a more rigid interview format was both a strength and a limitation in the research process. The flexible schedule facilitated discussion of important areas of the young people's lives without restricting them to answering specific questions, which might have narrowed the nature of the data collected. However, it also meant that it was difficult to ensure that the same areas were covered in every interview. On occasion, this resulted in less data in some areas, for instance, in the interview with David, Shaun and Reece, the subject of entering care was only briefly covered, mostly in relation to Reece. However it can be argued that to have insisted on covering each area of the schedule at equal depth would also have shifted the balance of power in the interview situation further towards me as researcher. It might also, as argued previously, have compromised any understanding of which aspects of participants' lives were most important to them.

The post fieldwork phase

Data analysis

In keeping with the principles of grounded theory, open coding was used, followed by axial coding, in order to elicit similar themes which existed across as well as through participants' accounts (Corbin and Strauss 2008). However, the small scale of a PhD study meant that limits to theoretical sampling had to be recognised, as a limited amount of data could be collected (Corbin and Strauss 2008). The data analysis was done as part of an ongoing process during the research by continued coding and categorising,

with the aim of grounding ideas in the data rather than imposing pre-existing ideas (Grieg *et al.* 2007). The initial stages of analysis were conducted using NVivo software, while in the later stages the themes were manually coded using printed copies of the transcripts. This approach gave me the benefit of being able to visualise individual participant accounts in a more vivid way than on the computer screen. The initial coding framework which was developed contained six categories: Agency, Experience of Care, Nature of Relationships, Roles and Responsibilities, Separation and Loss, Identity and Self Determination. These were further broken down - for instance Nature of Relationships contained codes such as the importance of family, the importance of friendship, and the definition of a sibling. Field notes and memos made during the research were compared with the interview transcripts to check for additional or confirmatory information, recognising that data collection can include unconscious as well as conscious analysis (Corbin and Strauss 2008). After this initial coding of the data, I decided to structure the analysis in terms of three broad areas: entering, living in, and leaving care. This enabled me to examine the significance of sibling and peer relationships within these areas, as well as addressing the wide variation of accounts within a research sample which was diverse in terms of age, experience and placement situation.

Issues of reliability, validity and the co-construction of accounts

In gaining insight into another's world through interview, there is another issue to encounter, that of 'truth' or 'reliability'. Adults have been found to question whether the young person's account is believable (Morrow 1999b). However, I did not seek objective truth or for that matter proof, in engaging with the young people. The research process recognised that any child will have their own viewpoint on their experiences which is in itself valid, even though in common with any research participant, child or adult, the 'facts' may not be accurate (Punch 2002b). In addition, choosing to add in or

leave out particular detail can be a way of keeping control in the interview situation (McLeod 2007). McLeod argues accordingly:

"Dilemmas of interpretation and management in interviews (whether children are telling the truth, how directively to question) are thus essentially questions about the use of power." (McLeod 2007: 283).

Thus the process of analysis must always respect the unique interpretation of their world offered by the child or young person being interviewed, as well as acknowledging the power of adult interpretation of their accounts.

Furthermore the interview does not represent the perspective of the participant in isolation, as it is co-constructed between researcher and participant; being an *'inter-view'*, in which interviewer and interviewee interact, in order to establish a means of dialogue and engagement (Schostak 2006: 3). Therefore it is the responsibility of the researcher to convey their interpretation of the participant's account to others, while also striving to make connections between all that they have heard. The interview is more than just the transcribed words on a page, as in that form, the data becomes further removed (Schostak 2006). The complete interview includes the researcher's recollections of the time and place, the expressions and sense of the time spent together to gather the research data. All this forms part of the meaning and therefore of the analysis.

The interview, then, can be used to gain an insight into the world as seen by the young person (McLeod 2007), but it carries with it an immense responsibility:

"Responding to people's lives, recording their experiences, their moments of crisis, their frailties, their intimacies, these are the challenges to the researcher. What is this moment of listening? And how does it 'translate' into the text of the transcript? How is the text then to be read? By focusing upon that moment of engagement between people where each attends to and addresses the other, this moment of engagement is critical for every dimension of what it means to be human. It sounds

like a grand statement. But here an emancipatory project either stands or falls."

(Schostak 2006: 9).

This responsibility is particularly apposite when researching the lives of marginalised young people who are likely to have had few, if any prior opportunities to talk about what matters to them in situations of their choosing.

Conclusion

This research study was conducted within a distinct theoretical framework which synthesised a sociological approach to understanding children's lives, with insights derived from post structuralism and post modern feminism. The framework provided a means of acknowledging children and young people as active participants in the research process, whilst recognising the considerable marginalisation which impacts upon their lives and relationships. Principles derived from grounded theory were used throughout to attempt to ensure that the findings were developed from data which was firmly located in participant knowledge and experience.

The methodology emanated from a participatory approach which privileged the perspectives of young people on their sibling and peer relationships. The challenges of working as a practitioner and a researcher in the field were interrogated, and the imbalance of power throughout the research process was acknowledged. Research methods were carefully chosen to engage young people and to facilitate learning about their relationships, as much as possible on their terms. The theoretical and methodological framework produced new, qualitative, research data concerning the sibling and peer relationships of looked after young people. The combination of a variety of research methods within a flexible topic schedule enabled participants to both talk about and demonstrate the meaning and significance of their relationships.

It is, however, also recognised that the framework had its limitations. The nature of the PhD study undertaken meant that it was not possible to extend the study to explore

accounts from young people before they entered care. Therefore the data was purely

retrospective in nature, and could not explore in any detail the nature of sibling and peer

relationships prior to the disruption of entering and living in care. In addition, whilst the

framework set out a participatory approach to gaining young people's views, it remained

subject to the power differentials between researcher and researched, which may have

inevitably influenced the nature of data collected. The data collected was also

influenced to an extent by the use of a flexible topic schedule, which although it

increased the choice given to participants, also restricted the potential to cover the same

issues across all the interviews. Finally, in order to reduce potential access difficulties,

the participants in the sample were all drawn from one local authority area.

Nevertheless, the accounts produced were representative of relevant issues for many

looked after children and young people. This was partly due to the wide range of

participant age and experience both at care entry and at interview, and partly due to the

themes within their accounts which both confirmed and extended existing research

concerning the significance of sibling and peer relationships for children in care.

As will be shown in the following chapters, the analysis of data from the study revealed

new, detailed, knowledge regarding the tenacity of sibling attachments despite long

periods of being looked after. It uncovered new knowledge about the importance of

close friendships, as well as the challenges faced by young people in negotiating

constantly changing peer relationships. It also revealed much more detailed information

about both the extent to which sibling and peer relationships are lost after young people

enter care, and the impact of this on young people's lives. It highlighted the adverse

social and material circumstances faced by care leavers, and their need for support from

friends, siblings, and sometimes boyfriends. Above all, the analysis revealed the many

and complex challenges faced by young people, both in and after leaving care, in

making and maintaining significant relationships with siblings and peers.

Chapter Five

The significance of sibling relationships
for young people entering care

"… you have been living with them since you were born" **- Andrew**

Introduction

Chapters Five, Six and Seven present an analysis of the meaning and significance of sibling and peer relationships based on the accounts of young people in the study, from care entry through to leaving care. They illustrate both the importance of such relationships and the challenges which they can present, in terms of maintaining positive relationships and negotiating difficult ones. In accordance with the theoretical framework established in Chapters Two and Three, all three analysis chapters will be grounded in the importance of giving priority to a young peoples' standpoint, through presenting their own accounts of their sibling and peer relationships. This approach recognises and counters the historical lack of priority within research and policy given to children and young people's views in general (Wilson *et al.* 2003, Schofield *et al.* 2007), as well as to their inter-relationships in particular (Berridge 1997, Timms and Thoburn 2003). The chapters will also be specifically concerned with identifying young people's efforts at agency, in the form of constructing and maintaining sibling and peer relationships. This approach acknowledges the unequal power relations with adults (identified in Chapters Two and Three) which characterise the lives of children in general (Mayall 2005, Wyness 2006), as well as highlighting the additional challenges faced by looked after young people, who are often powerless to influence decisions which affect their lives (Schneider and Phares 2005, Mason 2008).

Chapter Five presents a retrospective consideration of care entry, exploring the extent to which young people's accounts of their initial entry into care reflected separation from, or changes in, their relationships with siblings due to becoming looked after. Chapter Six will focus on the young people's accounts of being in care, and will therefore look in

detail at the effects of long-term care on their sibling and peer relationships. Chapter Seven will consider both the expectations and the reality of the impact of leaving care on such relationships, in the context of circumstances of multi-dimensional material and social disadvantage such as poverty, homelessness and isolation.

Out of the eighteen young people who participated in the study, twelve were living in care at the time of interview, three were preparing to leave care, and three had left care. They had entered care at varying ages, between two and fifteen years old. Therefore their accounts represent a diversity of viewpoints, from those who were looking back on their time in care, as well as those who were looking forward in anticipation of leaving care. Their experiences may also reflect different eras of childcare policy (Frost and Parton 2009), which may have affected professional decision making both at the point of placement and subsequently. Therefore this chapter, and the two subsequent analysis chapters, recognise the considerable variation across time and situation contained within participants' accounts. Nevertheless they aim to identify cross-cutting themes across accounts, while at the same time not losing sight of individual stories.

Although the disruption to friendships for children entering care has been identified as a significant theme within existing literature (Ward *et al.* 2005, Children's Rights Director 2005, 2009b, Gilligan 2009), it was noticeable that none of the participants chose to talk about their peers in relation to their initial entry into care. It must be admitted this may be due to the form which the interviews took; the topic schedule was not followed rigidly, and where the subject of entering care was raised, the young person was invited to take the discussion in whichever direction they chose. However, it may also have reflected other factors, such as young people's age at the time of entering care, or their priorities at the point of interview. For participants who entered care at a young age, subsequent friendships may have taken the place of those initially lost. For others, the relationship with, or separation from a sibling may have taken priority in their accounts over thinking about friendships. Many young people did talk about their peers in other parts of the

interviews, illustrating the significance of those relationships while living in care, and these themes will be explored in Chapter Six.

Chapter Five, then, examines participants' accounts in relation to entering care, through two main themes. The first reflects the impact of entering care on sibling relationships, through the young people's accounts of separation and loss, against a background of their difficult social circumstances. It recognises the degree of powerlessness present in their lives at the time, and explores small but significant examples of young people asserting their views in order to influence adult decisions or strengthen their sense of self esteem.

The second theme concerns the benefits of maintaining sibling relationships for young people entering care. It illustrates their importance in promoting a sense of familial and individual identity, highlighting in particular the tenacity of sibling attachments which began prior to entering care. It emphasises the ability of such relationships to endure over time, and to provide specific benefits to siblings in terms of emotional and practical support. It also considers instances where such pre-existing attachments were founded upon a caring role between siblings, exploring the importance of such a role for the current and future well-being of siblings.

The chapter then concludes by considering the ways in which its findings, relating to the significance of sibling relationships for young people at the point of entering care, confirm and take forwards known research, as well as highlighting implications for policy and practice.

The impact of care entry on sibling relationships

Background factors implicated in care entry

It is known that care entry often takes place against a background of problems such as poverty, racism, abuse and neglect, acute familial stress and parental illness (Axford 2008, Department for Children, Schools and Families 2009a, Owen and Statham 2009).

Where the young people chose to talk about the circumstances surrounding their entry into care, their accounts reflected similar problems, as illustrated by the following accounts.

Hayley's family left her father and moved out of the area; however her mother could not cope with the isolation, so they returned. This led to further problems with accommodation, coupled with poor school attendance, at which point Hayley, then aged fifteen, and her baby son Danny, were taken into care, leaving her younger brother and sister at home:

> **Hayley:** "*Because I had Danny and for a while I lived with my boyfriend, well my ex-boyfriend, Danny's dad, and his mum, but we were arguing a lot so I moved out and I went to live like with my mum, but my mum didn't have nowhere stable to live so we were all really just staying round friends' houses and my mum just thought it was out of order on us, like, 'cause we were living such an unsettled life, and she was dragging us from one place to another, 'cause we didn't have nowhere to stay and she couldn't afford private or bond or anything, so she phoned up the Social Services and just asked them to take us into care ...*"

In Sophie and Andrew's case, their mother became ill and their father struggled to care for them and their two older siblings, resulting in Sophie and Andrew being received into care, while the other two siblings remained at home:

> **Sophie:** "*Well then Mum started to get poorly so that is how we had to be put into care ... because Dad couldn't cope with me and Andrew because he already had Adam and Marie, Adam and Marie were older than us.*"
>
> **Andrew:** "*We're younger so … it was much harder.*"

Jade's parents had divorced, leaving her father also unable to care for the children, while Debbie had been living with a distant relative who physically abused her.

For all these young people, events outside their control were implicated in their entry into care. Their accounts of abuse, illness and homelessness reflected their attempts to make sense of such events, and seemed to represent some of the ways in which multi-dimensional disadvantage within families, such as longstanding abuse, parental stress and strained relationships, can often precipitate children's entry into care (Axford 2008, Department for Children, Schools and Families 2009a).

Being separated from siblings on entering care

Recent evidence points to the high numbers of looked after children who continue to be separated from their siblings on entering care (Children's Rights Director 2009a). This was a common theme across young people's accounts, with several of them providing evidence of being separated from either some or all siblings. The manner of separation varied between young people. As far as could be ascertained from the young people's accounts, at the time of care entry, six of the eighteen participants were placed separately from some of their siblings, six were placed separately from all their siblings, and six were placed with all their siblings.

Six of the young people came into care alone, resulting in separation from all of their siblings. This was a very difficult time in their lives, and some of them understandably did not talk in great detail about the event. However it was possible to gain some insight into the distressing nature of separation from siblings which resulted. Daniel, for instance, vividly described his memories of first coming into care:

> **Daniel:** *"Went into care when I was quite young and I got pulled away from my family, then most of the family started breaking down, so everyone was all unhappy."*

He was initially separated from his brother, and viewed the process of being taken into care as being the trigger for a series of events which resulted in the breakdown of his family. He recalled his mother protesting angrily when he was taken into care:

> **Daniel:** *"When they take your kids off you, obviously Mum ain't going to act all calm and that, she's going to be shouting and that, and they think she's a bad mother if she's shouting at us …"*

Daniel's description of events suggests that the background to his being separated from his siblings was a distressing scene of anger and confrontation. The events may have exacerbated the feelings of loss he was already having to cope with through entering care alone.

Nicky's account of separation from her brothers was evocative of the longer term impact of that separation. On entering care, she left two brothers at home, whom she was unable to see for a long time as a result of conflict with her mother:

> **Researcher:** *"So you wanted to see your brothers during that time but, you couldn't because you were obviously not having ... [contact] with your mum. So it's last year that you started seeing more of them ..."*
>
> **Nicky:** *"... yeah 'cause I seen my little brother on Christmas Day, but I was real upset afterwards."*

Nicky's account illustrated not only the distress of separation, but also the pressure of coping with her feelings about renewing contact with her brother on Christmas Day. Although Nicky chose not to elaborate on what was evidently a painful time for her, the comments made by Jade (not Nicky's sister but fostered by the same carer as her and interviewed with her) revealed how difficult it had been for Nicky. Jade remembered how Nicky had behaved when she first came to the placement:

> **Jade:** *"First time she came to our house she wouldn't talk to no-one."*

There was one example of a young person being given reasons as to why she could not be placed with her siblings. Hayley came into care with her young son, and was seen as a priority over her other two siblings:

Hayley: *"... but they took me into it [care] at first, I went into care with Danny [son] and for a while they were saying they can't put Charlie and Holly in care 'cause it's not urgent and there's not enough placements and everything."*

The reality for Hayley of being taken into care first, was that when her brother and sister were later taken into care, they were placed separately from her, and at a distance.

The other three young people who were separated from all their siblings did not talk much about the surrounding circumstances, however it was possible to discern some of the challenges which separation posed for them, in terms of their sense of identity and belonging. While growing up in care, Reece had to make sense of the fact that he was the only one of eleven siblings to have come into care. Debbie had left behind several siblings, including a brother who had abused her. She had received phone calls from this brother after leaving care, and found it difficult to speak to him because of the associations with her past experiences. Shelley, placed with her grandmother while her brother was moved through several foster placements, had wanted him to come and live with her, and waited some time for this to happen.

Some of those with several siblings had experience of rapid moves on entering care, both with and without siblings, as illustrated by this excerpt from Mark and Kerry's lengthy discussion:

Kerry: *"And then it was me and Mark went somewhere else."*

Researcher: *"Mm, so we've got Kate and Daniel there and then you and Mark went."*

Kerry: *"So that, yes but who was it with, Mrs. Brown or was it a different person?"*

Mark: *"You were there."*

Researcher: *"So … who do you think it was then?"*

Mark: *"The Smiths."*

Researcher: *"The Smiths, yes, okay. Do you think that was at the same time, or was it that Kate and Daniel went first?"*

Kerry:	"*Yes, same time, same time … yep.*"
Mark:	"*And then Daniel got moved somewhere else … and then …*"
Researcher:	"*So, let me show the different places; so then …*"
Kerry:	"*Daniel moved he went to a house.*"
Mark:	"*No Daniel got moved somewhere else.*"
Kerry:	"*Then he went to Mrs. Brown's house.*"
Researcher:	"*So he was moved from there, yes?*"
Mark:	"*Yes, and then Kate got moved to, what was the name again?*"

The accounts of Kerry, Mark, Andrew and Sophie reflected the reality for looked after young people of undergoing many moves (Schofield *et al.* 2007), which often began with a rapid series of separations from siblings. The accounts also confirmed the increased risk of separate placement as a result of being part of a large sibling group (Hegar 2005, Wulzcyn and Zimmerman 2005). The accounts of all these young people provided valuable insights, currently underdeveloped within existing research (as discussed in Chapter Three), into the profound and often distressing impact of separation from siblings on entering care.

Despite the negative effects of care entry, including enforced separation from siblings, it would be wrong to characterise the young people as simply passively accepting the events surrounding their entry into care. As will be shown in the following section, a few young people were able to react in ways which ameliorated, for them, the negative impact of the experience.

Accounts of assertiveness in relation to care entry

It is known that young people can experience the process of care entry as being one in which they are powerless to influence decisions (Schneider and Phares 2005, Mason 2008). This is indicative of the lack of power encountered by young people in general within their relationships with adults (Mayall 2005). Although most accounts reflected a

lack of control at the time of entering care, in a few situations young people's assertiveness came through, either in terms of a determination to make their own decisions concerning sibling contact, or to maintain a sense of self esteem within the process of being placed in care.

One illustration of assertiveness was provided by David, who felt that he and his brother had influenced adult decisions about contact with their other siblings. This is demonstrated by the following excerpt, in which he talked about their determination to choose how often they came home to see their family, which included their four younger siblings:

David: *"… cause we used to be out of Lacton … and then it [contact] had to be arranged by social services."*

Researcher: *"So you weren't able to choose then?"*

David: *"Well we was, 'cause we said come down there every week."*

[David's home town is referred to as Lacton in order to maintain anonymity.]

David's emphasis on the word *was* suggests that he and his brother directly challenged the frequency of contact planned by the local authority. Although he did not say whether this was successful, his assertive comments in the interview implied that this was the case. In addition, his repeated use of the word *we* demonstrated solidarity with his brother, also placed out of their home town.

Two other young people were able to construct accounts concerning their entry into care in which they retained a sense of self esteem. Reece talked positively about his ability to cope with having entered care at a young age:

Researcher: *"So how old were you when you first come into care?"*

Reece: *"Two … so I kept it large all the way through mate!"*

He further stated: *"nothing's changed, just except for I don't sleep at my mum's house"*. His assertion suggested a desire not to be set apart from his siblings simply as a result

of having been placed in care, and may have been of critical importance to him in maintaining a positive sense of self esteem.

In Kelly's case, the death of a sibling had precipitated her entry into care, and as a result she felt she had to challenge broader discriminatory attitudes towards children in the care system, which portray them as uncontrollable, or troublemakers (Children's Rights Director 2009c), stating *"I did nothing wrong"*. Both Reece and Kelly's accounts suggested that the young people concerned were attempting to maintain a sense of self esteem by making sense of their entry into care in a positive way.

The strategies of all three young people reflected how young people's assertiveness as social actors appeared to help them to feel as though they had increased control of their lives and relationships (James *et al.* 2005). Their accounts also hint at how such assertiveness was symbolically helpful when looking back on events which had been outside their control and had often resulted in separation from siblings. This provides an insight into the ways in which power can be constructed and exercised within specific contexts (Healy 2005).

The benefits of maintaining sibling relationships for young people entering care

The importance of siblings in strengthening a sense of individual and familial identity

Sibling connections have been found to reinforce children's sense of identity (Rose 2006) and sense of family (Brannen and Heptinstall 2003). In this study, where young people either lived with or had maintained strong connections with siblings, this did appear to provide important benefits. Firstly, for some of them their relationships seemed to enable them to recall jointly some of the events surrounding their entry into care. This function of sibling relationships has not been explored within existing literature. It can be illustrated through the following two accounts given by siblings interviewed together, firstly Andrew and Sophie:

Andrew:	*"I was with Wayne … was that … no I think that was my second foster parents maybe."*
Sophie:	*"I think I lived with you in the first one and then in the second one …"*
Andrew:	*"Oh yeah with that … what's her name … got a picture of her …"*

and secondly Mark and Kerry:

Researcher:	*"...can you remember what happened next, who went? Did you both sort of move from Mum's together or...?"*
Kerry:	*"No....well first of all Rory and Mike went, and then it was just us and Simon"*
Mark:	*"And Daniel"*
Kerry:	*"And Kate"*
Mark:	*"And Kate, and then Rory and Mike got moved to a new foster house...to the, oh what, oh...they went to Mrs Smith, Mrs Ann Smith"*
Kerry:	*"Don't know her first name, Mrs Smith, that's what we had to call her"*

These young people were able to help each other to re-construct past events and recall shared memories, which may have been beneficial in terms of making sense of their entry into care.

Secondly, as reflected in several accounts, where young people had been separated from their siblings, either being with, or maintaining regular contact with them seemed to contribute to their sense of individual and familial identity. Those who had been separated from some of their siblings emphasised what they saw as the unfairness of disrupting such important relationships, and the value of continuing contact, as illustrated by Sophie and Andrew's account:

Researcher:	*"I have got some sort of things that I wrote out … they are just some statements and things … you can think whether you agree with them or whether you don't and tell me what you think about them. And the first*

> one is brothers and sisters should not be split up when they come into care."

Andrew: "No I don't think so. I don't think … that is not that good because you have been living with them since you were born and it is not fair I don't think."

Sophie: "And you don't get to spend much time with them, well I do with Andrew because I am living with him but not Kate and Wayne. We don't usually see them so …"

Researcher: "And do you think it is important to spend time then with brothers and sisters?"

Sophie: "Yeah."

Researcher: "Why is that? Why is it important?"

Andrew: "It makes us like a big family."

Here Sophie emphasised the importance of spending time with siblings, while Andrew's final comment further illustrated how contact with siblings could be fundamentally linked to a sense of family.

The importance of familial belonging in the form of a sibling group was also demonstrated by Reece, who, despite having been separated from all of his siblings at the point of care entry, had managed to maintain regular contact with them. His comments revealed how he was able to identify with them by taking pride in their lives and achievements:

Reece: "One of my sisters is a solicitor innit. She works, my brother's come out the army, my little brother … my little sister, my older sisters, they just go to work, it's their life."

His repeated references during the interview to his relationship with all of his siblings suggested that they played an important role in strengthening his sense of identity, as well as his perceived membership of the family.

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The account of another young person, Jade, illustrated the benefits of remaining with siblings, as she talked positively about having been able to stay with her siblings on entering care. Her simple yet poignant comment *"We've been together all our lives"* stood out from other accounts in which young people had been separated from siblings, reflecting the reality for most looked after children, that entering care commonly results in separation from some or all siblings (Moyers *et al.* 2006, Children's Rights Director 2009b). Jade was the only one of the eighteen participants who had remained with all of her siblings throughout the majority of her time in care, having entered care with them aged six and remained with them for thirteen years, until the recent move of her older brother to independent living.

These accounts suggested that siblings were important in helping young people to strengthen their sense of both familial and individual identity. This could occur even when young people were not living with their siblings. Connections with siblings represented stable familial relationships amidst the upheaval of entering care, enabling young people to retain a sense of family in the face of loss (Brannen and Heptinstall 2003). This provides new insights into the important role played by siblings for young people entering care, and highlights the need to ensure that entering care does not result in the severing of such relationships.

The tenacity of sibling attachments

Research concerning children's perspectives on the importance of sibling relationships while in care demonstrates the extent to which children miss their siblings, and want to remain in contact with them (Sinclair *et al.* 2005, Children's Rights Director 2009a). It has also been argued that sibling connections have the potential to endure over time despite separation (Beckett 2002). The accounts of young people in this study revealed much more detailed information about the tenacity of such relationships, illustrating how pre-existing sibling attachments can grow in importance on entering care. For several young people, sibling relationships were characterised by a deep level of commitment to

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each other, which was often rooted in early childhood experiences, as illustrated by Rebecca's account:

Rebecca: *"… because she's my sister and like it's because of everything that I had to do when I was younger, she does feel, I dunno she feels as if, I just love her. Because of everything that happened I suppose, we've just grown that close …"*

Sibling attachments often took the form of a strong commitment to the current, as well as the future, well-being of siblings, and had developed over time to provide emotional and practical support. In one case, support was given in terms of solidarity at school as demonstrated by Sophie's description of protecting her brother:

Sophie: "*If Andrew gets picked on at school, I will go and sort it out because I give loads of backchat to people if they are saying stuff to me ... and if someone did something to him I will go up to them and go "what do you think you are doing to my brother?" and stuff like that."*

Another young person, Nicky, hoped to protect her younger brother from some of the problems she had encountered:

Nicky: "*I love him, I'm not sure if he'd do anything for me but, I'd do anything for him but, I don't' know about me, but he can't really ... I just want him to grow up properly, 'cos he's only ten ... but I just want him to grow up properly, and I don't want him to have hassles, like I did ..."*

As previously discussed, Nicky had had some caring responsibility for her brother before coming into care, and her account revealed that she had found the separation from him extremely hard. However this had not diminished the strength of her feelings for him, and she had worked hard to renew contact with him. Her relationship with him was invested with love and concern for his well-being.

The accounts of Nicky, and others, reflected a range of concerns about their siblings' future welfare, addressing issues such as safety, and isolation. In Rebecca's account,

she talked about some of the real issues she expected her sister, who was approaching teenage years, to have to contend with:

> **Rebecca***: "…I used to hang round the streets and drink. So I'd hate to see my sis, if I walked down that street and saw my sister drinking on the street corner, then I'd go mad. But I'd like her to know, I mean she does know, that if she ever wants to come round then she can…And this door's open if she wanted to. I mean I'm lenient with her drinking under age but I wouldn't want her to be out there doing it, she can come in."*

Hayley talked about her younger sister, and the importance of knowing that she was well cared for in her foster family. She also expressed worry for her brother, who was living alone:

> **Hayley**: *'cause I'll always be there for him, no matter what, 'cause I don't want to let him down, 'cause he needs someone to help him and I know that there's only a certain limit to what like, I just feel guilty, I feel like I've got to help him, he has no-one."*

The evidence from these accounts confirms existing research (Beckett 2002) in demonstrating that sibling relationships which had begun prior to entering care, had the potential to endure despite long periods of separation. However the accounts also extend what is known about children missing their siblings (Sinclair *et al.* 2005, Children's Rights Director 2009a), in providing insights into the long term commitment to each other's current and future well-being which these sibling relationships represented, and the provision of emotional and practical support which continued to exist between siblings regardless of past or present circumstances.

The importance of a caring role between siblings

Research conducted with adults (Schofield 2003), and older young people (Happer *et al.* 2006) points to the existence of caring roles between siblings prior to entering care, and there is some evidence from research with children to suggest that they are often concerned about the well-being of siblings who remain at home (Moyers *et al.* 2006,

Holland 2009b). For several young people in the study, strong sibling attachments established before care entry contained elements of a caring role, the significance of which was brought out more strongly than in previous research. Those who had a pre-existing caring role towards their siblings felt this all the more keenly on coming into foster care, whether they were placed together or not. This was clearly illustrated by Rebecca's recollections of entering care with her sister at a young age. She talked about vivid memories of being unable to get her sister to sleep on the first night in the foster home, as they had none of their belongings with them:

> **Rebecca**: "*I remember as well the first night that we went to this foster home, um, we didn't have anything with us, so like getting her to sleep was just, I don't know, she [foster carer] never done, she didn't have any bottles or anything.*"

Rebecca's first placement was unplanned, following a brief visit to relatives with whom it was intended that she and her sister would live. Rebecca's recollection of that first night had stayed with her as a very difficult time, when she had struggled to comfort her younger sister.

When talking about caring for and about siblings, young people sometimes emphasised connections which they felt had been present from birth, as demonstrated by Nicky's account. Nicky's close relationship with her brother had begun at birth, and continued as he grew up and she looked after him:

> **Researcher:** "*So did you used to do a lot of the jobs at home, did you used to look after Billy as well?*"
>
> **Nicky:** "*Yeah I did, so, I remember, 'cause like I don't remember my brothers being born apart from Billy, and you know, him actually coming in, and, I thought it was great I did, that's the only one I can remember, brother, I think that's why, 'cause I've seen him grow up and, great fat thing now, he was a little skinny thing, do you remember?*"
> [question addressed to Jade]

Her description illustrates the strength and the duration of her connection with her brother. She came into care due to conflict between her and her mother, and the biggest consequence of this was that she lost contact with her brothers, two of whom remained at home, for several years. She would occasionally see her eldest brother across the street, but did not see her younger two brothers at all. She described feeling upset at having to leave her brothers behind, and found the loss of contact most difficult in respect of Billy.

Throughout these accounts, there was an emphasis on the sense of responsibility felt by young people towards their siblings. Sophie recalled being given clear instructions by her mother to look after her younger brother when they came into care:

> **Sophie:** *"Because Mum said, when she left me with Andrew in the house, she said 'I want you to look after your brother when he gets older and be like a little mum to him. And I was like 'yeah'."*

Similarly, Daniel, who had briefly been placed in care on his own, was subsequently placed with his brother and felt a deep sense of responsibility for his well-being.

Sometimes, young people also had to contend with the dilemmas of balancing their sense of care towards siblings with their own problems and needs:

> **Daniel:** *"I stayed in the first placement with Adam but then I just lost it because they wouldn't let me see my part of the family and my behaviour got worse and I got moved out of that foster home and my brother stayed then I got moved about, you know what I mean, I was quite unhappy about that, not being with my little brother, so, because he probably needed me there because he weren't used to being on his own, so, because when I was there he wouldn't go anywhere without me, so eventually they moved him back with me because he stopped eating and everything."*

Like Daniel, Hayley was placed separately from her siblings, and although this was for different reasons, *i.e.* having a young son, she was still concerned about their well-being, taking comfort from the fact that they still had each other:

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> **Hayley:** *"… I think the reason why they like parted us, like put us separate was so Holly had someone, 'cause I had Danny to look after and to keep me company and so Charlie and Holly had someone for each other as well, so that's why they tried to placed them together really. But in a way it is good, but in a way probably if I was younger I would've wanted to be placed with my brother or sister, if I was on my own, I wouldn't want to be on my own."*

The accounts suggested that for young people entering care, caring sibling relationships which had been present prior to entry could take on greater significance. The young people's accounts therefore deepen understanding of the importance of caring roles between siblings. Existing research has emphasised the importance of such relationships from the point of view of adults who were once in care (Schofield 2003). Young people's accounts in this study offered moving descriptions of the care, responsibility, protection and comfort which they provided to their siblings, thus providing greater understanding of the strength and the significance of caring roles between siblings which can begin before care entry. Their accounts provide a more nuanced understanding of the nature of the displacement which has been said to occur when siblings are separated on entering care (Beckett 2002).

Patterned by gender?

Young people's accounts in relation to the care and concern given to siblings were, in all but one example in this study, provided by girls, suggesting the possibility of a gendered element to these types of roles. Examples of gendered patterning in existing research on sibling relationships for looked after children are restricted to general observations concerning the increased likelihood of boys to be separated from siblings, and conversely the increased likelihood of boys to be in monthly contact with birth siblings (Children's Rights Director 2009a). It is therefore not possible to draw firm conclusions.

One insight into the possible reasons for a gendered difference provided in this study is contained in Rebecca's account, which refers to her perception of the mothering role which she had assumed for her sister while they were living with their birth family:

Rebecca: *"I suppose I'm just being the older sister and watching over her. And I suppose sort of it is being the motherly figure to her as well because that's what I had to do when I was younger."*

Her account is paralleled to an extent by that of Nicky, who referred to her caring role towards her brother, as well as the many jobs such as cooking and cleaning for which she had responsibility when living at home. While there is insufficient evidence in these accounts to be conclusive about a gendered difference, they raise a further issue, in that boys may need extra help and support if they are to retain the same kinds of supportive relationships which had been developed mainly by girls in this study.

Conclusion

This chapter confirms existing knowledge that many young people are separated from siblings on entering care, and that they subsequently miss them. It also confirms what is known about the ability of sibling connections to persist in spite of separation. Young people's accounts also provided confirmation of the importance of sibling relationships in reinforcing individual and familial identity, as well as identifying that such relationships could include roles of care and protection. However, as discussed in Chapter Three, there has been little attention paid to the impact of separation from siblings on entering care, as well as the ways in which such relationships may be important. This chapter extends existing knowledge about children's sibling relationships during the process of care entry, by providing more detailed knowledge on both the effects of separation, and the strength and nature of sibling attachments.

The findings in this and the two subsequent analysis chapters also reflect the importance of attending to young people's accounts as well as to their definitions of the issues and problems affecting their sibling and peer relationships. This approach emanates from a wider theoretical and methodological aim of the thesis, which was to prioritise the views of children and young people in care on their relationships.

The accounts revealed the acute nature of young people's feelings of loss and distress on being separated from some or all of their siblings at the point of care entry. It was found that while in most situations young people had little power to influence events, drawing on a postmodern perspective it must not be assumed that this reflected a passive response. There were instances in which they were able to be assertive, either to influence contact with siblings, or to make sense of having come into care without siblings or following the loss of a sibling. Moreover, children's accounts showed that siblings were also able to play a vital role in helping one another make sense of care entry, and of surrounding events, which has not been adequately recognised before now.

This chapter has also provided strong evidence as to the importance of sibling relationships which began before care entry, and which persisted in spite of periods of change and separation. It was found that maintaining connections with siblings helped young people to develop a sense of identity, and also to retain their sense of being part of a family. Sibling relationships represented stable connections in the midst of change and uncertainty, and young people's accounts provided strong evidence of the vital sense of familial and individual identity which they derived from them. Young people's accounts also provided new insights into the complexity and depth of a caring role between siblings, demonstrating that where such relationships had begun before care, they continued to provide significant support. It was demonstrated that such care for siblings could take a variety of forms such as providing emotional reassurance or protection.

The accounts demonstrated that where young people had strong sibling relationships before entering care, they were able to provide each other with valuable emotional and practical support while living in care. It also illustrated the crucial significance of such relationships to the well-being of looked after children, both as carers and cared for. The accounts emphasised the tenacity of sibling attachments, highlighting the important role which they played in promoting current well-being. The long-term nature of these attachments was noticeable, as young people anticipated that they would support their siblings well into the future. The possibility of the gendered nature of sibling roles of care was raised. In summary, the chapter provided new information about the damaging effects of the loss of sibling relationships associated with entry into care, as well as the strength and longevity of sibling relationships formed prior to care entry, and the benefits which they can provide.

The findings from this chapter suggest that more attention could be given to the possibility of strengthening the requirements for the placement of siblings together or near each other, within current policy. This would need to be combined with a greater practice awareness of the important roles which siblings can have towards each other, and also a commitment within practice spheres to continuing to support such relationships after young people enter care. A greater understanding of the roles of care between siblings is particularly important, as this would contribute towards the support of such relationships in appropriate ways, rather than a concentration on replacing them entirely with roles of care provided by adults. More attention could also be paid to promoting children and young people's ability to contribute towards placement decisions which affect their relationships at the point of entering care.

Chapter Six

The significance of sibling and peer relationships
for young people living in care

"… what right have they got to not let you see your brother and sisters ...?" **- David**

Introduction

This chapter explores the significance of sibling and peer relationships for young people during the time that they were living in care. At the time of interview, fifteen of the young people were still living in care, while three had left care. Between them, all of the young people had a great deal to say about these relationships, from the importance of siblings as family, to the value of friendships. They also talked about losses they had sustained during their time in care, and revealed the many complex relationships with their peers that they had to negotiate on a daily basis.

The findings will be set out in three sections. The first section will consider how young people managed to maintain their sibling relationships, and in some cases, those with nieces and nephews, despite a background of separation and constant change. It will explore their attempts to sustain and develop their relationships, as well as to negotiate problems within them. It will consider the importance of siblings in promoting a sense of individual and familial identity.

The second section will consider the impact and the consequences of lost or altered relationships with siblings and other related children while young people were in care. Particular attention will be paid to the loss of siblings to adoption, as the traumatic and unjust nature of this loss was expressed strongly in young people's accounts. The section will also address young people's perceptions of the role of adults in promoting or hindering their sibling relationships while in care, considering situations in which they felt that foster carers, adoptive parents or social workers had been proactive in either supporting or severing such relationships. Finally, it will consider the extent to which the

accounts provided evidence of material and social disadvantage present in young people's lives while living in care.

The third section will consider the young people's peer relationships while in care, including friendships and 'sibling type' relationships as well as more transient relationships. It will explore the young people's accounts of the value of close relationships, as well as the need to protect themselves from loss by remaining detached from their peers. It will highlight the degrees of complexity which characterised the young people's relationships with their peers, many of which were thrust upon them due to their living situations.

The chapter will conclude by considering the ways in which its findings relating to the significance of sibling and peer relationships for young people living in care confirm and extend existing research. It will also highlight the implications for policy and practice.

Maintaining relationships with siblings and other related children

Existing research indicates the importance to looked after children of maintaining connections with siblings, demonstrating that sibling relationships can contribute to a sense of individual and familial identity (Brannen and Heptinstall 2003, Rose 2006). The accounts of young people in this study confirmed the importance of these relationships by adding depth to such knowledge, in the form of nuanced insights concerning the ways in which looked after young people maintained their relationships, and how they benefited from being siblings.

Without exception, all the young people in the study had siblings, (a total of sixty one between them), and at the time of interview all of them were living separately from one or more of their siblings. Their accounts revealed the many different ways in which separation had occurred; some were part of a large sibling group and had been separated through several placements, some had siblings who had remained with birth

parents, or been born to their birth parents after their entry to care. Some had older siblings who had left care, sometimes from the same placement as younger siblings, while others had siblings who had been placed for adoption. For many young people separation had resulted from a combination of circumstances such as these.

Young people's accounts often reflected the nature and importance of their sibling relationships, and they were shown to be actively engaged in maintaining them despite often having limited or no contact with siblings. In Chapter Five it was shown that attachments between siblings were often strong and had a capacity to endure over time, even through long periods of separation. Many of the young people demonstrated the continued importance of these relationships for them while living in care. Those who had older siblings with children of their own, also considered relationships with other related children such as nieces and nephews to be important.

Maintaining sibling relationships through shared activity or talking

Siblings who are separated through being looked after have been found to enjoy sharing activities and chatting as ways of keeping in contact (Aldgate and McIntosh 2006). For separated siblings in the study, shared activity seemed to provide an important means of maintaining a connection, by enabling young people to interact and create new experiences together. Nicky would regularly take out her youngest brother for the day when she could afford it:

> **Nicky:** *"I go to the pictures and I go with about sixteen quid, and that's all gone then, take him something to eat, get to the pictures, have something to eat there, lunch, go and get a present for him ..."*

Sharing an activity was demonstrated to be a valuable means of interaction which served to strengthen and extend the sibling bond. Sometimes very simple activities appeared to be sufficient to maintain relationships, such as visiting a sibling, or playing games with them:

Daniel: *"They [brother and sister in foster care] get weekly visits at my mum's, if I'm down there I'll wait until they're there and just go down to my mum's and see them, and play some football and good fun."*

Daniel would play football with his brothers, and Johnny would play games with his sister. Johnny described his sister as "*funny*" and "*really kind*", and evidently valued the time he spent with her. Reece, like Daniel, was able to visit his siblings at his mother's house; *"[I] ... go round there all the time"*. For Reece, having contact with his siblings appeared, to an extent, to ameliorate the effects of having had to live separately from them since a young age:

Researcher: *" … have you always lived separately from your brothers and sisters … from when you came into care I mean, or …?"*

Reece: *"Well yeah. It ain't a big deal though … see 'em for about … five or six times a week …"*

For other young people, shared allegiances were also valued; for example a shared interest in football allowed Mark and Kerry to identify with other siblings in their family:

Mark: *"My mum supports the best team … Because I support it and so does my other sister."*

Kerry: *"He supports Man U, and I support Liverpool the same as my big brother."*

Three of the young people who lived apart from siblings were able to go on holidays with them, providing opportunities for interaction with siblings over a longer period of time. This was illustrated by Shelley's account:

Shelley: *"We're going to Skegness in two weeks … me and my brother, my granddad and even Annie [sister] and my two little cousins … There's loads of stuff to do … Swimming, and they have like clubs that you can do things like shooting and basketball and all different sorts of sports and everything."*

Two young people's accounts suggested that talking with siblings was important. In Tom's case this kept him informed as to how his brother was:

Tom: *"Just to see how each other is getting on. Just to find out about him."*

His need to know about his brother also illustrated the way in which he cared about him. For Hayley talking to her sister helped her to cope with feeling isolated from other family members:

Hayley: *"... when you need someone to talk to and you get upset and you miss your mum and stuff like that, it's good to be able to talk to someone and it's good to be able to talk, sometimes you just need to talk to your sister."*

For these two young people, talking to siblings from whom they were separated offered them reassurance, as well as in Hayley's case, providing emotional support. In Hayley's account, it was significant to her that she and her sister had shared some of the same experiences, thus helping them to support each other.

These accounts of support, responsibility and care between siblings illustrated how, despite separation, many young people had strong sibling attachments which they were actively engaged in maintaining through both activity and talking. These young people had often been separated from their siblings for years rather than months, yet the tenacity of the attachments was evident. The accounts confirm findings related to the importance of sibling connections for looked after children (Brannen and Heptinstall 2003, Rose 2006). They deepen existing understanding in revealing more about the ways in which sibling relationships could be both maintained and strengthened through joint activity and communication. They also demonstrate the ways in which those relationships could also result in the provision of emotional support between siblings.

Negotiating sibling relationships

Existing research has identified some of the benefits of sibling relationships for children in care, such as improved mental health (Tarren-Sweeney and Hazell 2005), and mutual support (Children's Rights Director 2009a). However, the complex challenges faced by

young people in negotiating their sibling relationships while in care has not received similar attention, and therefore may have been underestimated. The accounts of four young people in this study revealed that being a sibling could mean having to cope with problems within relationships. The data indicated that maintaining sibling relationships was not always easy, and could require young people to develop skills of negotiation, illustrating a variety of different scenarios in which they had to do so. Tom's account provided an example of this. He lived apart from his brother Chris for some of the time, and had to adjust to living together again. His brother lived in residential school accommodation, returning to live with him in the same foster placement for one weekend a month:

> **Tom:** *"... we get along for hours and we get along for minutes and then ... the arguments start and Chris kicks off and I go flying."*

For Tom, this constant separation and reunion generated mixed feelings. He had previously lived full time with Chris and felt that although he and his brother had fewer arguments since being separated; living together previously had enabled them to see more of each other:

> **Tom:** *"I mean it's better now because we don't argue as much but it was better before because we see each other, so …"*

His account provided one example of the difficulty of renewing a sibling relationship in the context of frequent separations.

One young person described the problems which had resulted from talking to a friend about past family history, by revealing information which her sister had wanted to keep private:

> **Kelly:** *"In many respects I should have respected her wishes. I know it's my life and everything, but I can say what I want about my life. But then again, it wouldn't have harmed me not to. Because ... I told ... about me and that's kind of blurting about her. She's upset by it."*

Kelly's desire to confide in a friend had generated conflict within her relationship with her sister.

Two of the accounts referred to problems encountered by young people in negotiating relationships with older siblings who were living independently. It appeared that Nicky was learning to distance herself from two of her brothers:

Nicky: *"You see, my other two brothers, to be honest, I couldn't ... be bothered with them, to be honest, that's because they ain't got a lot of sense, especially the older one, he just drinks ..."*

Stuart was often put under pressure from his older brother, living independently:

Researcher: *"But does he [brother] ask you for things then, does he want things from you?"*

Stuart: *"Yeah, mostly money but not all the time."*

For all these young people, maintaining their relationships was not always easy. Whether they were having to renew a sibling relationship frequently, deal with differing needs of siblings to talk about the past, or resist pressure from older siblings, these young people had to learn how to negotiate conflict and expectations. Their accounts add new insights to existing knowledge about the nature of sibling relationships for young people in care, highlighting in particular the pressures which sibling relationships could generate, as well as the complex negotiation skills that were demanded of them to maintain relationships under such circumstances.

Claiming sibling relationships

It is known that sibling relationships can be especially important to looked after children where other connections with the birth family have been altered or lost over time (Herrick and Piccus 2005, Leathers 2005), and that they can symbolise the family that a looked after child may have lost (Brannen and Heptinstall 2003). Perhaps as a result of complex family relationships, the importance of siblings as 'family' often featured

prominently in young people's discussions, functioning as a means of strengthening both individual and familial identity. Many of the accounts illustrated that family membership could often be established and maintained through sibling relationships, with eight young people defining family in terms of sibling relationships, as illustrated firstly by Kerry:

Kerry: *"... they're your family, they look after you and you look after them, look out for each other".*

The importance of siblings as family was also evident in Johnny's account; when asked if siblings were important, he responded that "*They see you and they are your brothers and sisters. [They are] your family, they're all together."*

Several young people's comments also suggested that siblings could also help each other to recall other family members, and provide them with tangible reminders of their birth family, and of their own origins:

Researcher: *"Why do you think brothers and sisters are important?"*

Sophie: *"Because they are like your life to remember as well."*

Researcher: *"Try and explain what you mean then? You remember what ...?"*

Sophie: *"I remember our mum and stuff because our mum … made him like …"*

Andrew: *"Made us …"*

Researcher: *"… and brothers and sisters are important because?"*

Shelley: *"As family."*

Researcher: *"Is there anything else that family's about?"*

Shelley: *"It's where you come from."*

The representation of siblings as 'family' seemed particularly significant where young people had been moved around multiple times within the care system, and returned to parents at other points, thus having a potentially bewildering number of places and people in their past. For four of them, living with some of their siblings at the time of

interview meant that they were able to help each other recall the changes which had occurred during their time in care. This was illustrated simply by Andrew, who had been too young to remember many of the moves he and his sister had had:

Andrew: *"I thought there weren't many people who we went to. Sophie knows."*

In Chapter Five the role of siblings in helping each other to make sense of care entry was discussed, in relation to the accounts of Andrew, Sophie, Mark and Kerry. Their accounts subsequently revealed that they were also able to pool knowledge of their past history related to moves since entering care (as illustrated by Andrew's comment above). Therefore these siblings were also able to help each other make sense of events and moves during their time in care.

For one young person, coming to live with a sibling after previously having been placed alone was reassuring**,** as it meant being with a family member:

Daniel: *"Well, I first come in separately, then I got pulled back out [by] social services to go back and live with my mum, then I got run over then I got put into care with my brother, and it was - that was with my brother, part of your family's there as well, makes you feel a bit better."*

Daniel's account of being '*pulled'* out of care and *'put'* back in, were indicative of situations beyond his control. His account suggested that a mitigating factor was being placed with his brother.

Siblings could also be an important reference point when other family relationships were fractured, as described by Rebecca, whose limited family contact meant that her involvement with her sister took on increased importance:

Rebecca: *"... apart from my gran and my granddad out of my family it's her that's there, so. I suppose that's why she's really important."*

However, contact with siblings, while greatly desired, could also constitute a poignant reminder of the lack of contact with wider birth family, as illustrated by Kelly:

Kelly: *"… they're [siblings] important to other people because they share something with them, they share the good, they share family, they share their mum, their dad, your grandma. In our family it's very hard. This is it."*

These accounts demonstrated the crucial importance to looked after young people of being able to access family membership through being a sibling, thus confirming existing research findings (Brannen and Heptinstall 2003), although this could also mean that painful feelings about birth family were brought to the surface. Echoing the study's findings concerning entry into care, as discussed in Chapter Five, sibling relationships seemed to enable young people to feel they belonged to a family. They were also shown to take on a heightened significance in the absence or disruption of other birth family relationships, as previous work with looked after children has found (Herrick and Piccus 2005, Leathers 2005). The accounts provided more detailed information than pre-existing research relating to looked after children about how siblings can represent family. They revealed that relationships with siblings could help them to feel that they belonged to their birth family, and could also provide valuable links to their family background, sometimes helping them to make sense of their time in care. They also revealed that being placed with siblings could reassure young people and help them to maintain connections with their birth family.

The importance of other related children

There is some evidence to suggest that looked after children may form 'sibling type' relationships with other related children if living with them (Tarren-Sweeney and Hazell 2005). However, there has been little attention within research to the extent to which such relationships exist, or to the nature of their importance to looked after children. Within the study, there were several examples of this nature, concerning young people who referred to the importance of their nephews and nieces, even though they did not live with them. Their comments revealed some parallel qualities between the significance of siblings for young people, and the significance of nieces and nephews.

Five of the young people listed their nieces and nephews as amongst those children they considered important in their family, as illustrated by Kerry's comment:

Researcher: *"… so you've got Cara and Theo."*

Kerry: *"That's our niece and nephew."*

Sophie and Andrew described how they looked forward to seeing their niece and nephew, while Tom talked about how his nephew was growing and developing:

Researcher: *"So have you seen Joe at all yet?"*

Tom: *"No but he's started walking, he's took his first few steps. He's got his first baby tooth and he might be taking his first few steps. I haven't heard recently. I'll find out".*

These accounts suggested that, in a similar way to siblings, young people wanted to remain in contact with their nieces and nephews, and that they benefited from seeing and knowing about them. This extends existing knowledge concerning looked after children, in demonstrating that 'sibling type' relationships with nieces and nephews can be developed even where children do not live together, and that their importance to children does not diminish over time or in situations where there is a lack of contact.

Lost and altered sibling relationships

Mapping loss and change

Following reception into care, young people can often be moved away from siblings over a period of time (Children's Rights Director 2009a,c). Most children who are looked after have siblings either placed elsewhere (Moyers *et al.* 2006) or at home with birth parents (Holland 2009b). In addition to losing contact with existing siblings, new siblings can be born to birth parents after children enter care (Schofield and Beek 2005). Furthermore, most children who are looked after lose contact with at least some of their siblings during their time in care (Sinclair *et al.* 2005). Similar experiences were

reflected in the accounts of many of the young people, who had lost contact with siblings in different ways, and at different points throughout their time in care. At the time of interview, eight were living separately from some of their siblings and ten were living separately from all of their siblings. The whereabouts of siblings ranged from living at home with parents, at residential school, in other foster or adoptive placements, in prison, living with other relatives, or living independently. Several siblings were living a long distance away from the local authority area in which the young people were being or had been looked after.

The following excerpts from the interviews illustrate the complex ways in which siblings had become separated. Sometimes rapid moves in and out of care resulted in some siblings remaining behind with birth family, or being placed separately:

Researcher: *"Was Bobby still with Dad all this time?"*

Sophie: *"Yeah he was living with Dad."*

Researcher: *"Yeah okay. So you went to Mum. Then … so … who came back into care then, was it all three of you? Or …?"*

Sophie: *"Adam never. Only for like two weeks until they sorted it all out and then he went back with Dad."*

Andrew: *"Yeah and I went with Angie and Bill."*

Seven young people were known to have been at one time placed with several of their siblings; however the placement had broken down for one or more of them:

Researcher: *"… so you two have stayed here then and so what … something happened with Kate didn't it?"*

Kerry: *"Yes, she's gone … Gone and dusted."*

Two young people were moved on from placements they had shared with siblings they felt responsible for, having to leave them behind as their own needs and troubled behaviour overtook them. Three young people had siblings who were born after they had entered care, as illustrated by Mark and Kerry's comments:

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> **Mark:** *"... there were some others that weren't at home then."*
>
> **Kerry:** *"Those weren't even born yet."*

These young people had little or no contact with these siblings, who were subsequently adopted. The young people's accounts echoed the reality for looked after children (Sinclair *et al.* 2005, Children's Rights Director 2009a, Gilligan 2009), that separation from siblings continues to occur after entering care.

Loss of relationships with other related children

Although existing research has found some evidence that children miss their siblings when those siblings leave care (Children's Rights Director 2009e), little is known about the long-term impact of such separations, or the additional consequences such as the loss of relationships with other related children. Where young people had siblings who left care, they viewed the consequential loss of relationships with their nieces and nephews as important.

Six young people talked about older siblings with children of their own, who were living independently. Their comments revealed that infrequent or lost contact with these siblings could also result in the loss of relationships with their nieces and nephews. In Tom's case he had lived with his sister and her son, and had not seen either of them since they left the placement several months earlier:

> **Researcher:** *"So how often do you see them?*
>
> **Tom:** *"Don't know, they don't come over here. Mind you they're still probably settling in".*

Mark and Kerry also had not seen their niece and nephew for several months, and attempted to piece together information about them:

> **Mark:** *"I only saw Cara, I only saw her once."*
>
> **Kerry:** *"That's because Theo weren't born when you saw her."*
>
> **Mark:** *"Then the next contact with Mum and they're going to come down."*

Kerry:	"That's if they're allowed."
Researcher:	"Yes? How old are they then, Cara and Theo?"
Kerry:	"Cara is going to be two soon. She's going to be two the 20th July. And then Theo's only about six months, five or six months."
Mark:	"Is she that old?"
Kerry:	"What do you mean she's that old?"
Mark:	"… She can't be that old!"
Kerry:	"… You haven't seen her for six months Mark, six or seven months."

These accounts suggested that the young people concerned were trying to maintain relationships with their nieces and nephews in the face of limited information and sometimes lengthy separation. They also highlighted the additional losses which looked after young people can sustain if they lose contact with older siblings (Children's Rights Director 2009e) who are also parents.

Loss of siblings to adoption

More evidence is beginning to emerge as to the extent to which siblings are lost as a result of adoption, and the impact of this on looked after children. Children have talked about adoption of their siblings as permanent, and expressed the unfairness of this (Padbury and Frost 2002, Children's Rights Director 2009a). However, while it is recognised that birth parents have to contend with long lasting feelings of grief and loss (Smith and Logan 2004), the impact on siblings has been less extensively recognised. It was demonstrated in Chapter Three that adoption has an entirely different legal premise to being looked after, in that it places the child not only within but as part of a different family, without any presumption of contact (Department for Education and Skills 2002). This extinguishes the legal relationship with all members of the birth family, including siblings (Sayer 2008). The loss of siblings through adoption emerged as a strong theme from the data. Out of the eighteen young people, eight had lost a total of eleven siblings to adoption, and their accounts were characterised by feelings of anger,

a sense of unfairness, and sadness. Whilst each young person experienced their loss in a unique and personal way, their accounts were unified by the finality of loss, and the sense that adopted siblings were no longer part of their family. Although the young people had been powerless to do anything about it, nevertheless their accounts indicated that they saw adoption as an injustice, and that they refused to accept the finality of separation which it represented.

Losing siblings to adoption was presented in young people's accounts as very traumatic. Shaun, whose four youngest siblings had been adopted, vividly emphasised how he felt the loss had affected him and his brother David:

Shaun: *"If you keep thinking about it you're just going to go and jump off a bridge aren't you ... like David he probably drinks all the time, for so many reasons, just trying to cover 'em all up."*

Daniel similarly talked about what he considered to be the injustice of having been separated from his brother:

Daniel: *"Disgusted like, they took my little brother and my flesh and blood away from me, it's not fair."*

Their accounts give some insights into the distressing nature of losing siblings in this way, and how young people are left to cope with their feelings of anger and despair while trying to continue with daily life.

Reece, David and Shaun were also able to put into words their sense of injustice at the adoption of siblings:

Researcher: *"I suppose for some children if they can't live at home with their own mum and dad, like your brothers and sisters who couldn't live with your mum and dad, then what …"*

Reece: *"Well fair enough, yeah, if they can't."*

Researcher: *"What happens then?"*

David: *"… if there's problems going on in the house that they're living in, yeah but, fair enough they can move yeah, but it don't mean <u>adopt</u> 'em."*

Reece: *"Cause, that, then put 'em in fulltime care or something innit, but to adopt 'em, that's just like saying, I, I beat my son up, yeah, at the age of four, yeah, and then, then he moved."*

Shaun: *"Yeah, and adopting some kids, yeah, um the parents must have had to do summat really bad, wouldn't they? … Really bad ..."*

Reece: *"But you never know, anyone can change though."*

Their discussion suggested that they viewed adoption as a last resort, and felt that if siblings were placed in foster care, that offered an opportunity for family problems to be addressed.

One young person, Daniel, talked about the loss of two siblings, one of whom he had lived with and helped to care for:

Daniel: *"Well I did spend quite a lot of time with Will like a year of his life, and I wasn't doing too bad but then my mum got arrested for like attempted murder and sort of - social services thought if my mum's going to prison there's no-one to look after the baby, but my brother was learning to look after the baby, then they said no, it's best that he goes into care, and he got adopted obviously, but yeah, the best little brother you could have really, he was all right. Yeah, sweet little fellow. Now Jack the other one, I didn't get to see him, the day he was born was basically the day he got taken away, so but he got adopted so I haven't heard about him …"*

Daniel's account suggested an especially strong attachment to his brother Will. His loss was presented as all the more poignant in the context of his description of having tried, with the help of another brother, to care for Will when his mother went into prison.

Where siblings had been adopted, the finality of this came across strongly in young people's accounts. Their sense of powerlessness in the process came across in their descriptions of being told that they were not allowed to see their siblings any more, or

that they must wait until their siblings reached adulthood. Most young people also had either little or no information about their adopted siblings. They did not know where they were, who they were with, or what they looked like. Kerry and Mark thought that writing to their siblings or contacting them in the future would be impossible because:

Kerry: *"... we won't know where they live."*

Sophie and Andrew were only allowed indirect contact (by letter) with their sister, and were concerned that this was not sufficient for her to really understand that she was their sibling:

Sophie: *"... I think Joanne has been told that we are her brothers and sisters."*

Andrew: *"But she doesn't like really ... what is the word? Really know."*

For these four young people, siblings continued to hold significance for them even though they had had little or no contact prior to their adoption.

The importance of direct contact was illustrated by Daniel:

Researcher: *"So is it important then to know that you're part of another family and not just your adoptive family?"*

Daniel: *"Yeah I think so, yeah, 'cos eventually if you actually go and spend time with your normal family, even though you've got an adopted family, but you get to terms with it and like you get to visit that, and eventually you'll be back as a little brother or something."*

Sophie and Andrew's comments suggested that they thought it was not sufficient to simply know, as an adopted child, that you had siblings. Daniel's comments confirmed this, suggesting that he saw direct contact as important and integral to helping the adopted child build a relationship with their birth siblings.

There was one isolated, powerful example of a young person joining together with his siblings to challenge the proposed adoption of his sister. Reece had a strong sense of solidarity with his siblings, and this description illustrates how the sibling group came together to actively challenge an impending court decision:

> **Reece:** *"…my sister man, my mum was going to go to prison yeah, she was gonna get 'er … adopted innit, she was gonna get adopted but, it all fell through innit, because, they were saying yeah, social workers were saying that Mum was a bad mum yeah … but then, we played a little game with 'em, I thought, they can play games we can play games too yeah … so, all my family come into the court room … we all stood up yeah, and then, ten of us, what's it, one of my sisters is a solicitor yeah, one, one's came out the army yeah, one's been university everything yeah … and the ju, even the judge said yeah, how can this woman be a bad mum, yeah? You've got a woman here, her daughter's a solicitor, one that's been in the army … two that's in like, going into college yeah, one that's doing well for herself so how can this single mum be a bad mum innit you get me, yeah everyone makes mistakes in their life innit?"*

Reece's comments revealed a sense of pride in his and his sibling's achievements, in demonstrating why their mother should be allowed to care for their sister. This was the only example of a young person challenging an adoption related decision. The absence of other examples in the face of young people's unhappiness at the loss of contact with siblings illustrates the lack of control in decision making for looked after young people. This lack of power in decision making has been found to begin at the point of entering care (Schneider and Phares 2005, Mason 2008), and these accounts demonstrate that it can continue throughout young people's time in care.

Within existing research, as discussed in Chapter Three, the profile of the adoption of siblings has become a more prominent issue, in terms of the finality of adoption, and the powerlessness of children to intervene or to have their views taken into account (Padbury and Frost 2002, Children's Rights Director 2009a). This heightened awareness of the loss of sibling and peer relationships which adoption represents for looked after children contrasts noticeably with the continued drive within policy to increase the numbers of children adopted from care (Ball 2002). However, the young

people's accounts revealed much deeper insights into the nature of the loss of siblings through adoption. These accounts add vital in-depth information on the significance of adoption for those siblings remaining in care, regardless of the degree of contact which had been present before adoption. The adverse effects on the older siblings of adopted children were particularly noticeable within this study, as these young people were shown to have had strong relationships with their younger siblings and in some instances to have had a caring role towards them prior to their being adopted. There were also indications that direct contact was seen as more important by young people than contact by letter, in terms of enabling siblings to maintain their relationships with each other. In particular, the young people's accounts illustrated the feelings of anger, grief and despair paralleled in the accounts of birth parents (Smith and Logan 2004) following the adoption of a child. They also provided evidence that young people identified the loss of contact with siblings as an injustice, as well as giving a powerful example of how siblings could join together as a group in order to challenge the process of adoption.

The role of adults in facilitating and constraining sibling relationships

Research with adults previously in care has highlighted where foster carers have helped children and young people to come to terms with problems within their birth family as well as related issues about contact with birth family members (Schofield 2003). It is also known that adoptive parents are usually given priority over children in making decisions regarding sibling contact (Roche 2005). However, perhaps as a result of a focus on adult-child relationships within the field of research, as highlighted in Chapter Two, there is limited understanding within research relating to looked after children, of the role of adults in either actively promoting or constraining relationships between siblings.

Five young people's accounts contained examples of situations in which they saw foster carers, and in one case a social worker, as having supported their sibling relationships.

For two of them, this had taken the form of foster carers providing a home for them to enable them to stay together. For another, a social worker had liaised with him and his brother about renewing contact with their other siblings:

Stuart: *"They came to us and said 'your brother wants to see you', or 'your sister wants to see you again'.*

Where there was a good relationship between young people and foster carers, contact with siblings was presented as happening in an informal and positive way. Both Daniel's and Rebecca's comments illustrated this:

Daniel: *"... if it wasn't convenient for my foster carer my sister's foster carer would come and pick me up and take me to her house, and I'd be there most of the day ... There was one time where I never even had a coat, she actually bought me a coat out of her own money because I was cold."*

Rebecca: *"I … mean I still see my sister now so it's not like a big deal that I don't see her because I can just go round whenever, I visit, I have quite a good relationship with her foster carer, so it's all right."*

Within the accounts of these five young people, foster carers in particular were seen by them to play an important role in helping them either to live with or to see their siblings.

In stark contrast to such support, five young people's accounts revealed that they held social workers and adoptive parents responsible for separating them from their siblings through adoption. Kerry and Daniel's accounts suggested that they viewed social workers as having the power to prevent them having contact with their siblings:

Kerry: *"We're not even allowed to go and see them ... the social workers won't let us, no one will let us."*

Daniel: *"Well at the time, because my social worker thought it was best that we didn't see them and that because basically they were getting adopted so really - and basically she said no you ain't got rights, because they've already been adopted, and basically said they're not a part of your family no more, so, really did break this family up quite a bit."*

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Although in reality the loss of contact through adoption is determined by law, nevertheless young people perceived social workers to have power over the decision making process.

Three of the young people felt strongly that adoptive parents should not have the right to adopt someone's siblings, and this was reflected in the outrage and anger they expressed. They spoke passionately in condemning the actions of people whom they saw as choosing to adopt a child's siblings without thought for the consequences. In the following account, David and Shaun were referring to their personal experience of the adoption of four of their siblings, whereas Reece had been involved in the proposed adoption of one of his sisters:

> **David:** *"What right, what right do them people have, who's fostering them, er, change their names and that, change their surnames, what, what what what right do they have …"*
>
> **Shaun:** *"... adoptions there won't be any adoptions if bloody people just could have babies."*
>
> **Reece:** *"That's what I'm saying, just two people, yeah, that can't have kids, yeah, they take someone else's kid because they can't have babies that's their problem innit."*
>
> **Shaun:** *"Then they feel so happy but they don't think about er, the other family."*
>
> **Reece:** *"Innit that's their problem."*
>
> **Shaun:** *"I mean if they actually did think about the other family they'll see how much … and they'll just …"*
>
> **Reece:** *"Innit that's what I'm saying …"*
>
> **Shaun:** *"That's just like stealing."*

Their account portrays strongly their perception of the powerful position of adopters, as well as what they saw as the unjust nature of an adult being able to take someone's siblings away from them. The perception of the powerful position of adoptive parents reflected in this discussion was further emphasised by Sophie:

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> **Sophie:** *"... we need to get in touch with her more when she is a bit older because when she is adopted you are not really supposed to see her ... that is what her parents said that they don't want us to see her."*

Here the wishes of birth siblings were seen to be subject to those of adoptive parents, who had decided that there would be no direct contact.

The accounts of these young people revealed very definite contrasts in how they saw the role of adults in promoting or hindering their relationships with siblings. Foster carers were shown to play a significant role in facilitating informal contact between siblings. By contrast, social workers and adoptive parents were portrayed as being responsible for the prevention of contact between separated siblings. The accounts also highlighted the extent of the powerlessness encountered by young people who were attempting to maintain relationships with their siblings. They confirm what is known about the likelihood of adult views prevailing over children's views in adoptive situations (Roche 2005). However, they also deepen our understanding of the degree of distress, and sense of injustice looked after children may feel, and the strength of negative feeling which they may direct towards adults as a result.

Multiple dimensions to social disadvantage while in care

Chapter Three explored the nature of the multiple dimensions to disadvantage which can affect the lives of looked after children, arguing that many factors including poverty, racism, disability and gender can be implicated in their entry into care, as well as affecting their lives while they are living in care (Family Policy Alliance 2004, Frost and Parton 2009). As discussed in Chapter Five, young people's accounts from the study confirmed the presence of multiple disadvantage at the point of entering care. However, their accounts of living in care revealed that their lives were affected by social, rather than material disadvantage, as reflected in their discussion of ageist power relations and social isolation.

While living in care, young people's accounts provided a few examples of the ways in which young people had felt the impact of oppression. One of these, as highlighted earlier in this section, was where young people had often felt powerless to influence or alter adult decisions regarding the adoption of their siblings. This theme of powerlessness will be returned to in the following section, in which it will be demonstrated that young people talked about some of the problems involved in negotiating relationships with their peers. There was also some evidence, which will be discussed in the following section, of gendered differences within young people's behaviour, as it was only young women within the study who were actively engaged in trying to maintain supportive relationships with boyfriends.

There was also one example of a young person, Debbie, (who was of African Caribbean origin) who encountered problems related to her ethnicity which affected her peer relationships. She described having little contact with young people of the same ethnic origin:

> **Debbie:** *"No, I don't know anyone [of the same cultural background] … I've got like Rhianne … Rhianne, sorry, and Marlene … when I was at my first foster home, they lived down the road. And my friend, Marianne, she lived opposite my foster home, which I went to primary school and secondary school with. But it was just … they're like the only black people that I know really. … I don't really have a cultural kind of background, other than my hair products that I buy, so ... being in care ruined that."*

Debbie also felt that staff at the residential home where she had lived for some time had not met her cultural needs, commenting that they had refused to give her enough money to buy the specialist products which she needed for her hair.

Given the limited nature of the evidence in this area, it was not possible to draw detailed conclusions regarding the impact of multiple disadvantage. It seems likely that the presence of protective factors may have lessened the effects of material, rather than social, disadvantage for these young people while living in care. Whilst the adverse

effects of living in care on relationships with siblings and peers are evident, it has also been argued (Axford 2008) that being in care has the potential to be a positive experience, providing increased stability and material provision, as well as providing better opportunities in general. Nevertheless, it will be seen in Chapter Seven that the impact of multiple disadvantage for young people had not abated completely. At the point of leaving care, and while living independently, young people's accounts revealed that they were encountering serious adversity, in the form of problems such as poverty, violence, homelessness and social isolation.

Peer relationships while in care

Opportunities

Existing research points to the importance of friends for looked after young people in terms of providing emotional support, companionship (Beek and Schofield 2004) and protection (Children's Rights Director 2009b); however, as discussed in Chapter Three, it provides limited detail of the ways in which young people in these situations construct or maintain friendships. While in care, the young people in the study were shown to be making great efforts to sustain those relationships with peers which were important to them. Key themes which emerged from the data were the benefits gained from friendships, such as shared time and mutual support, as well as important elements in being able to establish such friendships, such as similar experiences, stability and longevity.

Where the young people were able to maintain friendships or build new ones, this could afford them valuable support. Friends could be beneficial in a number of ways. Young people defined their friendships both through what they shared, and the benefits they received. Friendships were maintained often through shared activity, such as sport or socialising. Enjoying the time spent with friends and having a good time were considered key tenets of friendship:

> **Shelley:** *"I like going down the pub ... just go round my mate's house and listen to music ..."*

> **Tom:** *"Because without friends you might have nothing else which you can do, without brothers and sisters and mums and dads ... They might be the only people who might play with you."*

Another key aspect of friendship identified by young people was the ability to offer mutual support. This was often vital especially at difficult times in a young person's life, when a friend could help them to cope with loss and change. This was the case for two of the young people in the study, as the following accounts illustrate:

> **Daniel:** *"... we've basically got similar background ... and family problems and that, and someone that's got like basically the same problems as you it's easier to go and talk to them, because you can actually talk to them about your family and he talks to me about his family ..."*

> **Stuart:** *"I told him I was in care because he … he did go for … we never went in together … he had to go into … home for children [residential home] because he was being naughty at home, so he had to go in there. So he knows what it's like a bit and that. He knows what I'm feeling when I go on about it, because he's been in that home, so …"*

Where young people had similar past experiences, it appeared to help them make an emotional investment in the friendship. This meant that they were able to confide details about their families, or the history behind their entry into care.

In addition to past experiences, longevity seemed to be an important part of establishing the familiarity and stability necessary for a friendship. This enabled young people to make friends and establish trust. The accounts of Daniel and Nicky illustrated this:

> **Daniel:** "*Oh me and him are close, quite close, we always hang round together and that, so we are like really personal, so it's a lot different to when like people are only going to be here for a little while, like I can be proper friends with him ..."*

Nicky: *"It's funny to be honest, and I know it sounds strange, but I always feel safe, safer when I'm with Jade, because I know what to expect and stuff."*

Another young person, Reece, also referred to friends he had had in residential care whom he had known prior to living with them. These three accounts suggested that knowing someone over a long period of time contributed to making strong friendships.

In addition, where relationships had endured over a long period of time (as in the case of two of the young people, Jade and Nicky), they also had the potential to become 'sibling type' relationships:

Researcher: *"And do you see each other as friends, or ..."*

Jade: *"Like sisters now innit."*

Researcher: *"Like sisters?"*

Nicky: *"... like sisters .... unfortunately." [laughs]*

Jade: *"It's like a sister I've never had, if you know what I mean, it's like, we've known each other ..."*

For one young person, friendship was especially important as it gave him access to the support of a friend's family outside of the care system. This has some parallels with a research study conducted with adults, which found an example of a young person benefiting from support from a friend's parent (Schofield 2003). However Stuart's account in this study goes much further, emphasising the ways in which his friendship gave him access to 'ordinary' family life:

Stuart: *"... they're so nice to me that it feels like I'm back at home, here ... I know I'm not at home but it feels like it because they just treat me like their own, so ..."*

Researcher: *"So you feel like you're one of the family, like their own son?"*

Stuart: *"Yeah ... So I just like going round there because I know I'm welcome."*

It will be seen in Chapter Seven that this account bore similarities to that of another young person, Debbie, who had left care. Both these young people gained invaluable

benefits from the involvement with the families in question, such as a sense of belonging and acceptance, as well as the availability of practical and emotional support. In addition, neither young person had support from their siblings, indicating that family membership of this nature through a friend could offer vital support where this was not available from siblings.

Having a friend was also found to be a means of expanding young people's friendship networks and therefore of increasing a sense of social inclusion:

Stuart: *"… you can get more friends from seeing your friend and seeing their other friends and … he sometimes gets a big load of them in from his old school to play football with us, so … I don't usually speak to them but I do speak to them you know, if I'm playing with them."*

It could also mean being perceived by others as someone who belonged, as indicated by Kerry. Although Kerry's account did not indicate the importance of close friends, it did acknowledge the significance of being part of a large group of friends:

Kerry: *"You don't look lonely when you've got friends."*

The preceding accounts confirm what is known about the benefits of emotional support and companionship which can be gained through friendships for young people in care (Beek and Schofield 2004). They also demonstrate the value of being able to confide in and trust friends, particularly when living with them. They extend understanding concerning the importance for young people of similar experiences, as well as the importance of knowing someone was not going to move away, as integral factors in building a trusting relationship. A further significant new finding was the crucial role of friends outside the care system in providing access to 'ordinary' family life. While providing new information about the benefits of accessing family membership outside the care system, this finding also resonates with the increased use over recent years of kinship care (Hunt *et al.* 2008), which has the potential to provide a stable family environment for looked after children.

Losses

Existing research indicates how entering care can result in the loss of friendships as a result of changes in placement or school (Gilligan 2009). It is also known that many children lose contact with all the friends they had prior to care entry (Children's Rights Director 2009a). In addition, children who are looked after can and do sustain further losses of friendships, particularly over long periods of time (Ward *et al.* 2005, Children's Rights Director 2005, 2009b). The young people's accounts provided some evidence to confirm this, as five of them described losing contact with friends. This sometimes happened due to a change of school or as a result of placement moves, both in residential and foster care. Sophie described having lost contact with a close friend:

> **Sophie:** *"... I used to have a really nice friend, she was called Angie. And when we moved to St. Peter's I missed her. Because she was like my best friend."*

Young people were also affected when other fostered young people moved on from the same placement. Even where they did not move far, it could be difficult to maintain friendships, as those who had moved started to lead separate lives:

> **Stuart:** *"They all went their own ways or just didn't ask could I keep their numbers and that, so could get in touch with them, just left them to do their own thing. Thinking that's what they want to do, go and do their own thing. They don't like me to keep ringing them up to see what they're doing do they, so I just left it at that."*

Evidence concerning the loss of friendships was much more limited in this study than in existing research. It may be that other losses such as those sustained by the adoption of siblings took precedence in their accounts. However it should also be borne in mind that this study reflected existing evidence that children can make new friendships after entering care, which may compensate for the loss of other ones (Aldgate 2009). In addition, as will be seen in the following section, young people often chose not to form new friendships while in care, as a measure of protection against loss.

Complexities

Within the research literature, complexity within peer relationships tends to focus on the implications for care leavers of being put under pressure from other young people wanting to borrow money or use their accommodation (Broad 2005). Less is known about the pressures on young people while living in care. However, the transitory nature of relationships with other looked after children as a result of placement moves has been emphasised (Skuse and Ward 2003), and may be of use in understanding why peer relationships can be difficult to negotiate in such circumstances.

Young people's accounts from this study revealed that peer relationships could be challenging during their time in care, as well as after leaving care. Their accounts also reflected their powerlessness to determine living arrangements in respect of peers. Young people often found themselves thrust into living situations with their peers such as other looked after young people, or a carer's child or grandchild, which placed demands on them in terms of having to negotiate new relationships over which they had little choice. In both foster and residential care there were often numerous children moving in and out of a placement.

Several of the accounts represented young people's attempts to protect themselves from future loss, by choosing not to get emotionally involved with others who were looked after in the same placement. This was the case in both foster and residential care. Many recognised that these young people would not stay for long, and that it was not worth getting involved:

> **Daniel:** *"I don't really get attached to people like when they're just coming in and not here for long ... be friends with them yes ... there's no point getting attached."*

Some comments revealed young people's awareness that becoming too involved could result in upset either for them, or for those who had to leave. This is illustrated by the following two accounts. Stuart had chosen not to get involved, after having found it difficult when young people had moved on previously:

Researcher: *"So you've seen lots of other kids come through?"*

Stuart: *"Yeah, come through and go out the same day near enough. Not the same day but come in and stay here for a couple of months or a couple of years, then go. They go back to live with their parents"*

Researcher: *"Back to their parents?"*

Stuart: *"Yeah, or moved on to another foster parent. It is hard for me when they all go … if I got on with them it was hard, I had to start all over again. But if I didn't get on with them, it didn't bother me"*

Nicky's account echoed similar thoughts, although in her account this was explained as a means of protecting not her own feelings, but the feelings of the young person coming into the placement:

Nicky: *"you see if someone comes into care, and they're with us, don't really bother, to be honest, cause it's gonna be twice as hard on them to go, so I won't, I just, I don't think it's right"*

Young people dealt with the situations in the best way that they could, by trying to maintain relationships with others without getting too involved:

Stuart: *"… we all have to live in the same house, so I'd rather just try and get on with them as long as I need to."*

Reece: **"***… you can't live in a children's home and go 'I'm your best mate today', it just ain't gonna work. You have to live together so you just think, forget it. You do your own thing … but if you get, you get, you chat to them obviously, you chat to them like normal friends innit, you wouldn't go out and say they're your friends, cause they're not … do you really think they care about what happens to you, outside? I don't think so ... so it's just use and abuse innit. It's like what we do with girls … It's like anywhere you go, it ain't just in care or anything, it's like if you [go] to school … the same thing will happen there, but obviously in school you make friends."*

Reece's emphasis on the word *'you'* illustrated his view that whereas at school he could choose who to be friends with, in the children's home he could not choose who he lived with.

The young people's accounts reflected self-protection strategies such as distancing themselves or exploiting relationships without getting personally involved (Kools 1999), which can be employed by children and young people in order to protect themselves from future losses in relationships. They also provided deeper understanding of some of the pressures which faced many of these young people in having to form new and often transient relationships on an ongoing basis. The accounts revealed that many young people resorted to tolerating, rather than engaging with, each other, resulting in little benefit to either party. This may have offered them a pre-emptive degree of self protection against friendship losses.

Boyfriends and girlfriends

Although the role of boyfriends and girlfriends for looked after young people does not feature highly in existing research, it is known that new families established through relationships with boy and girl friends can be of great benefit to young people after leaving care (Sinclair *et al.* 2005). Three of the young women in the sample had begun to build relationships with boyfriends while in care. None of the boys' accounts referred to girlfriends at this point, although as will be seen in Chapter Seven, two of them referred briefly to the role of girlfriends after leaving care.

Their accounts illustrated a range of problems which they encountered in trying to construct such relationships while in care. Kelly had wanted to confide in her boyfriend about the reasons why she came into care:

> **Kelly:** *"So I decided to tell him but that put him off. It didn't put him off me, it just … he went all quiet and he wouldn't talk to me and I'm like should I have told him? And he just looks at me … And he's like I appreciate you told me but it's not something I wanted to hear."*

Debbie struggled with how she felt about difficult times in her past, and her comments revealed that her boyfriend found this hard to deal with:

Debbie: *"I was with Ben for two years and he was like my first proper boyfriend. Loved him to bits but he finished with me … And I went round his house and I wasn't myself kind of thing, how I am normally you know, and I was just really down and wouldn't speak to him, wouldn't let him come near me, just everything. And he finished with me …"*

In Rebecca's case, she started a relationship with another young person in her residential placement, which proved to be difficult as it was not sanctioned by staff:

Rebecca: *"To be honest we were sneaking around for ages because the staff didn't like it. The staff like knew that something was going on between us because before we started flirting with each other we never used to speak to each other or anything."*

While these young women did not share the same circumstances, their accounts demonstrated similar challenges which they faced, when trying to establish relationships with boyfriends while in care. Their comments revealed new insights into the ways in which past traumatic experiences could affect current relationships, as well as the challenges involved in conducting a relationship in an environment of heightened adult supervision.

Conclusion

The findings in this chapter confirm a number of themes present within existing research concerning looked after children's sibling and peer relationships. The accounts confirmed the importance of young people's sibling relationships, and the role they can play in promoting both individual and familial identity, and providing support. They also illustrated the importance of sibling relationships to young people where other familial relationships had been lost, showing that they often provided young people with a sense of family. They demonstrated the importance of relationships with other related children

such as nieces and nephews. There was confirmatory evidence of the successive

separations from siblings which could occur during care, (which sometimes resulted in

permanent loss of contact through adoption), and of the loss of contact with other

related children. The accounts also demonstrated that friendships could provide

important benefits to looked after children, as well as confirming the transitory nature of

many peer relationships within placements.

 Young people's accounts within this chapter illustrated the ways in which sibling

relationships could constitute strong attachments, which were capable of enduring

despite long periods of separation. Through shared activity and talking with each other,

young people were able to maintain their relationships, and derive emotional support

from each other. Sibling connections were also shown to be important in strengthening

young people's sense of individual and familial identity by helping them to feel part of

their birth family, to remember birth family members, and to keep track of placement

changes since entering care. The overall evidence points to the previously

underestimated strength of sibling attachments for looked after children in existing

literature, as well as the benefits in terms of emotional well-being and identity which they

can provide. Young people's accounts also revealed new insights into the importance

of relationships with other related children such as nieces and nephews, and the

consequential losses which could result from a loss of contact with the older siblings

who are the parents of such children. However, it was also evident that in some cases

siblings could exert negative pressures on each other, highlighting the demands placed

on looked after young people to engage in complex negotiations with their siblings as

part of their everyday lives.

A particularly significant addition to existing knowledge about sibling relationships was

the traumatic nature of the loss of siblings to adoption. Young people's accounts

highlighted feelings of loss, anger and grief, and expressed a strong sense of injustice

at losing siblings in this way. The finality of the loss which adoption represented for

them was evident, as well as the nature of the powerlessness which they felt, in terms of their inability to alter the situation. Particularly noticeable was the effect of adoption on those young people living in care who often had younger siblings who had been living with birth parents, and were subsequently placed for adoption, with no plans for contact thereafter. This situation illustrated a marked contrast with that of older siblings who had been able to maintain contact with younger siblings as a result of them remaining at home or in foster care (as discussed in Chapter Five). In the latter situation, this had often resulted in strong and often mutually supportive relationships which were set to continue well into adulthood.

As young people's accounts did not provide significant evidence of material disadvantage, it was concluded that living in care provided a degree of protection in that respect. However, young people's lives were noticeably affected by a lack of power, reflected in their perceptions of adult intervention within their relationships. This was most evident in relation to decision making concerning adoption, a situation where most young people had felt powerless to prevent the adoption of a sibling.

This chapter has revealed greater understanding of the nature of peer relationships for young people living together in care. Firstly it has shown stability and longevity to be key aspects in the formation of strong, beneficial relationships. Where young people were placed together their accounts revealed that they needed to know that this was intended to be on a long term basis, in order to feel they could emotionally invest in friendships with others. The accounts also demonstrated that young people could find it easier to make friends when they had similar past experiences, as this enabled them to establish mutual trust and understanding. A particularly interesting finding from the accounts was the potential for friendship to provide access to membership of a family outside the care system. These insights into friendships contribute new understanding concerning the kind of environment which fosters young people's ability to form friendships while in care, as well as indicating their intrinsic value to young people. The

accounts also highlighted the challenge of maintaining relationships with boyfriends for young women in care, suggesting that other events in their lives could affect their abilities to do so.

Young people's friendships while in care were, however, presented in stark contrast to the many transitory relationships which they were required to make with their peers. Their accounts revealed that they often chose not to invest emotionally in relationships, due to the frequency with which their peers moved on. This was indicative of a major problem which was affecting young people's ability to make and sustain friendships, potentially limiting their support networks.

The findings concerning the strength of sibling attachments and their vital role in promoting young people's well-being and sense of identity highlight the need for greater recognition of the importance of sibling relationships. In practical terms this could take the form of exploring more ways of keeping siblings together, and the provision of increased support to enable separated siblings to maintain their relationships during their time in care.

Given the traumatic nature of the loss of siblings to adoption, there is also a pressing need for greater understanding of the extent to which this affects the sibling relationships of children and young people in care, particularly in the context of the importance of sibling relationships for support during care and in later life. There is also a need to enable young people to have their views effectively heard within adoption proceedings which pertain to their sibling relationships. Potential adopters would also benefit from a greater understanding of the importance of sibling attachments and their long term significance.

The role of friends in the provision of emotional well-being, family membership and social inclusion suggests a need to consider ways of supporting young people's friendships during their time in care. This may include increased prioritisation of kinship

care placements, as well as considering ways of improving placement stability for young people in residential care and in joint foster placements. Improving stability may also make it easier for young people to form stronger, closer friendships with their peers which may benefit them in later life. In addition, young people could be encouraged to engage in leisure activities which might help them to form friendships with other young people outside the care system. All these measures could contribute to a sense of social inclusion.

Chapter Seven

The significance of sibling and peer relationships
for young people leaving care

"I think seeing your brothers and sisters is more important than your mum and dad" **- Sophie**

Introduction

Chapter Five acknowledged the strength of sibling relationships which frequently began before young people entered care, and which were often severed, but could sometimes be sustained despite many challenges. Chapter Six found that sibling relationships could provide young people with a valuable sense of identity, and that peer relationships could sometimes represent supportive friendships, but could sometimes be characterised by conflict. This chapter demonstrates that similar themes were also present in young people's accounts whether they were at the stage of thinking about, preparing for, or leaving care. It explores the continued importance for looked after young people of close relationships with siblings and friends for this stage in their lives, as well as considering some of the challenges they had to negotiate concerning such relationships.

At the time of interview, three of the eighteen young people in the study were living independently. Of the other fifteen young people, three were engaged in planning for and discussion about leaving care, and the remainder had not reached that stage. This wide variation in young people's circumstances meant that their accounts ranged from thinking about leaving care in the future, through planning for leaving care, to living as a care leaver. They also had differing ideas about, as well as experience of, the extent to which they would either be in control of their own lives, or might need adult support. Consequently the chapter not only explores sibling and peer relationships in relation to these different stages, but also allows for an examination of the disparity between the young people's expectations of life after care, and the reality of life after care.

The accounts of those young people who had left care reflected both material and social disadvantage. The effects of such disadvantage were most evident with regard to poverty, homelessness, violence, and social isolation, as well as to a lesser extent gender and ageist power relations. Other issues such as racism and disability did not feature prominently in their discussions related to leaving care.

The findings are approached through three sections. The first section is concerned with the accounts of the twelve young people living in care who had no plans to leave care at the time of interview. It addresses their expectations of life after care, including their thoughts about being in charge of their own lives. It considers the worries some of them had about coping with leaving care, and the ways in which they planned to give support to their siblings. It also explores the young people's thoughts concerning who would be important to them, and who would be most likely to help them keep in contact with their siblings and peers. The second section looks at the accounts of the three young people who had begun making plans regarding leaving care. It explores their thoughts about the impending reality of making decisions and managing relationships with siblings and peers. It looks at who they thought would support them, and how they thought they would cope.

The third section looks at the accounts of the three care leavers. It explores the reality of leaving care, and the mismatch which emerged between their experiences, and the expectations of those still in care. It highlights their relationships with siblings and peers in the context of circumstances of significant material and social disadvantage, and considers the extent to which peer relationships represented a threat to their emotional well-being. It also considers the extent of emotional and practical support provided by adults, and in particular the value of this for young people with little or no support from siblings or peers. Finally, the chapter considers the findings relating to the significance of sibling and peer relationships for young people leaving care, pointing to the ways in

which they confirm and take forwards existing research, as well examining the implications for policy and practice.

Expectations of life after leaving care

The viewpoints of those still in care provided valuable insights into their hopes, expectations and worries, which could subsequently be compared both to the views of those getting ready to leave, and those who had been living as care leavers for some time. Of the twelve young people with whom this section is concerned, most of them talked about leaving care in some form, although the extent of this was shaped, as was the whole interview, by the direction in which they chose to take the discussion. In one instance the subject of leaving care was not raised, due to the point at which the two young people concerned chose to end the interview.

The importance of siblings

Research concerning young people's thoughts on leaving care tends to be conducted either at the point of leaving, or retrospectively (Children's Rights Director 2006), rather than, as is the case here, asking for their views a long time before they leave. What is known is that once young people have left care, siblings are amongst those family members valued highly by young people for support (Dixon and Stein 2005), and that in some cases young people may be closer to siblings than to parents (The Prince's Trust 2002, Wade 2008). Several of the young people who were not likely to leave care in the foreseeable future expressed strong feelings about the importance of their siblings, both in terms of expectations about seeing them, and about how they would support each other.

It was particularly noticeable that these young people had clear expectations of seeing siblings regularly, and were optimistic concerning the ease of arranging this, as demonstrated by the following three accounts:

Tom: *"All I've got to do is ring them up and say, come over here now. And they'd come over ... because what you do is ring up one and tell them to ring up this one and tell them to ring the other one, a whole chain. And then they've got me to say come on over and everyone makes one little phone call."*

Shelley: *"Everybody will be out by then, and come round for dinner … go and pick them up in my car …"*

Kelly: *"So, Sunday's the day. Just drive off, no-one in the way. No-one can stop me because I'm old enough to make my own decisions. No-one can turn me away. Or if they do ... do try and stop you, you can kind of say well it's a family day. I'm going to see my family ..."*

[Tom and Shelley's accounts referred specifically to siblings, whereas Kelly's account referred to siblings and the wider family].

Similarly, Johnny (who had learning disabilities) thought he would live at a residential school, and that he would invite his siblings to visit, and take them to the shops.

These young people appeared confident that they would be able to maintain regular contact with their siblings on their own terms. Their comments were suggestive of strong existing attachments to their siblings which they believed would continue. They felt that their sibling relationships would be an important part of their lives after leaving care, as illustrated by Sophie and Andrew's accounts. Although Andrew's comments suggested that he was worried about how he might cope after leaving care, Sophie appeared to see it as her role to support him:

Andrew: *"Because like ... when I think, I wonder what it is like when I am older, I think it is going to be hard for me. It might not but ... I don't know."*

Sophie: *"I will have to come round and do his ironing probably for him. You can't iron can you Andrew? ... I would clean all of his kitchen and do everything ... housework ..."*

Andrew's concerns about life after care made Sophie's commitment to supporting him all the more significant. Although his concerns about coping provided an isolated example amongst the accounts of the young people who were at this stage, another young person had similar general concerns about how she would manage at the point of leaving care. The accounts of those who had left care bore out such concerns, demonstrating that isolation was one of many aspects of social disadvantage which could face young people after leaving care.

Overall, the accounts suggested that these young people expected their siblings to be an important part of their lives after leaving care, providing familial interaction and support within their daily lives. They also expected to be able to be in control of making decisions about their sibling relationships, which may have reflected the constraints on their decision making while living in care, as well as the degree of optimism with which they viewed life after leaving care.

The young people's accounts resonate with existing research emphasising the value of siblings for support after leaving care (Dixon and Stein 2005). They offer insights into the expectations of those still in care with regard to the ease of maintaining relationships, and the importance of siblings for support, after leaving care. The strength of these sibling connections suggests that, as was found in Chapter Five, the foundations for such relationships were laid down long before the point of leaving care, and had the capacity to endure over time (Beckett 2002). The importance with which these young people imbued their sibling relationships after leaving care also demonstrated the role which siblings can play in reinforcing children's sense of family (Brannen and Heptinstall 2003). The findings move beyond existing evidence in indicating that well in advance of leaving care, young people expected their sibling relationships to be important after leaving care, in terms of providing social contact and practical support, as well as being easily negotiated.

Having a family of your own

There is some evidence to suggest that support can sometimes be afforded to young care leavers from newly formed families of their own (The Prince's Trust 2002, Broad 2005, Sinclair *et al.* 2005). The accounts of those living in care represented mixed views on having a family of their own. It was seen to be important as one of several other relationships:

Researcher: *"OK, and who do you think will be the most important person or people when you leave when you are older?"*

Tom: *"Family, so that's more than one. That's one group. Friends, that's another group; and my own little family, if I have ever have one."*

It was sometimes seen as a means of moving out of care and not being on your own, as illustrated by Shelley who hoped to make a home with a boyfriend if possible:

Shelley: *"Live with my boyfriend if I've got one … or a friend."*

It could also represent a dilemma where a young person had seen the security which it provided to an older sibling, but knew that they were not yet ready for that stage:

Kelly: *"Because with Sian [sister] she's got her own little family"*

Researcher: *"You mean with Joe [sister's boyfriend] ?"*

Kelly: *"Joe, and she's still with the father … So that's her own little family"… and then … I'm not jealous or anything, I don't want to be, not yet anyway."*

It could also be part of a longer term plan in which living with a friend would precede getting married, as illustrated by Sophie in the following section.

These accounts indicated the hopes of some young people that setting up their own families might provide support and a sense of familial belonging after leaving care (The Prince's Trust 2002, Broad 2005, Sinclair *et al.* 2005), confirming a pattern other studies have picked up among care leavers. These young people may have placed heightened importance on the value of setting up their own family, in the context of altered or lost

relationships with their own birth family (Herrick and Piccus 2005, Leathers 2005). Although only a small number of those living in care referred to having their own families, their accounts were significant as part of the overall picture, as this was also a theme in the accounts of the three young people who had left care.

The importance of friends

Existing research emphasises the support provided by friends to those leaving care, (The Prince's Trust 2002, Children's Rights Director 2006), as well as acknowledging that friends can be seen as more important than siblings (Broad 2005). Chapter Six explored themes of friendship, concluding that young people were able to establish strong friendships where they had known others for some time or thought they were not likely to be moved on.

Although only four of the twelve young people talked about friends in relation to leaving care, their accounts revealed an interesting gendered difference in the responses. The two girls envisaged living with friends, as illustrated by Sophie's account:

> **Sophie:** *"I am going to live with a girl, with A….. until like I get married and whatever. Living with my husband."*
>
> **Researcher:** *"So you would like to live with your friend?"*
>
> **Sophie:** *"We have already planned it out already"*

The boys' accounts, by contrast, concentrated on the importance of socialising with friends. Friends could be a backup in the event of problems with family members:

> **Tom:** *"Because if I'm annoyed with my family and that then I can always turn to them; ring them up and say meet me down the pub"*

They could also provide much needed support to reduce feelings of isolation:

> **Reece:** *"…you need friends to chat to innit, to go out for the crack and that, and someone to chat to, 'cause if you don't have anyone to chat to man, you get depressed man."*

Within existing literature, some small gendered differences within the friendships of looked after children have been identified, suggesting that boys are more likely to maintain some form of contact with friends from previous placements (Children's Rights Director 2009a). Although young people's accounts from the study differed slightly, the boys' accounts contained similarities with previous research, in that they appeared to see friends as important on a group level to socialise with. This was different from the girls' accounts, within which close friends were seen as potential living companions.

Despite these apparent gendered differences within this study, the young people had similar expectations that friends would be important after leaving care, with their accounts providing insights into the ways in which friends might provide support through living together, or reducing a sense of social isolation. Tom's account also echoed existing research, that friends have the potential to be more important than siblings (Broad 2005), offering a listening ear in the event of conflict with siblings.

The expected role of adults for support after leaving care

The role of adults in supporting young care leavers continues to be a topic of some debate. Current government initiatives are focused more on whether young people should remain with their carers for longer (Department for Children, Schools and Families 2008b), rather than how much support carers should provide after leaving care. However, foster carers in particular are known to provide significant support to young people even after they have left their care (Schofield 2003, Sinclair *et al.* 2005). This was a possibility anticipated in some of the young people's accounts within the study.

Findings from the study suggested that although adults had a less prominent role in young people's accounts than siblings and friends, nevertheless foster carers were anticipated by some as being able to provide advice, or as being an important reference point, as illustrated by Kelly's comments:

> **Researcher:** *"So when you start moving in to your own place then, who do you reckon are going to be the most important people for you, to be around for you?"*
>
> **Kelly:** *"Well I'd like to think it were my family, but something's telling me Mary and Colin [foster carers]"*

Foster carers were further seen by one young person, Tom, as having a specific role in maintaining relationships between him and his siblings and peers:

Tom: *"Sheila could communicate with family and she could give messages to some of my friends if they came to the door …"*

There was also an isolated example of the potential role of parents in providing general support after leaving care, as demonstrated by Andrew and Sophie:

> **Sophie:** *"Probably your dad actually [will be important] because he will help you find a job or whatever."*
>
> **Andrew:** *"Or mums."*

Social workers were only referred to by two of the young people, and even then were not seen to play a major part in young people's lives after leaving care. This was illustrated first by Shelley:

> **Researcher:** *"Do you think when you get older, and if you do move out at some point and get your own place, do you think there's anything that people like Will [social worker] could do to help you sort of with keeping in touch with your brothers and your sisters?"*
>
> **Shelley:** *"Not really"*
>
> **Researcher:** *"No? So who do you think would sort out when you see them?"*
>
> **Shelley:** *"Me … I'll go round and pick them up in my car"*

and secondly by Reece:

Reece: *"Try and get the <u>most</u> out of people in social services, and then, try and get the most out of em … and then, just walk away with a smile on your face happy… get, get what you want in life innit?"*

These latter accounts suggested that these young people intended to be self reliant rather than rely on the support of adults, in a similar way to the young people's discussions (highlighted earlier) of making their own plans to see their siblings. Reece's account epitomised such self reliance in the extreme, and suggested that relying on others could be a risky enterprise:

Reece: *"… just do things for yourself and then you'll get more in life innit; if you rely on some people too much, like if you rely on a girl too much, yeah, your girlfriend, you know things gonna break down innit; or if you rely on your car too much, you never know one day you gonna go to work and your car's gonna break down …"*

Researcher: *"Yeah, so you see it as mostly relying on yourself".*

Reece: *"Yeah it's, that's life innit, you have to rely on yourself … if you rely on other people too much then you not gonna get anywhere."*

These accounts suggested the various ways in which, in the young people's view, adults, although not social workers, might be important after leaving care. They contrast with the comments (later in this chapter) of young people who were preparing to leave care, and who while getting support from key adults in preparation for leaving care, nevertheless expected emotional support after leaving to come solely from their siblings and friends, rather than from adults. It is therefore possible that, as young people move towards leaving care, they have a more developed understanding of the difference between the degree and kind of support offered by adults, and that offered by siblings and peers.

Getting ready to leave care

Anticipating problems within peer relationships after leaving care

The vast majority of young people leave care between the ages of sixteen and eighteen (Children's Rights Director 2006, Department for Children, Schools and Families 2009a), although limited government measures are now aiming to address this (Department for Education and Skills 2007). It is well known that young people often feel they are leaving care too early and unprepared, particularly in terms of the emotional aspects of independent living (Centrepoint 2006, Children's Rights Director 2006). It is also known that young people can come under negative pressure from their peers wanting to exploit them by making use of their accommodation or spending their money (Broad 2005).

Three of the young people, Daniel, Nicky and Stuart, were starting to make preparations for leaving care. In contrast to those young people with no plans for leaving care, who expected not to receive support from adults, these young people were receiving valuable adult support. In the main, this took the form of practical support and general advice; however in one case, it also involved advice about how to deal with peer pressures, and the associated risks of losing accommodation.

The accounts of all three young people were illustrative of known problems such as peer pressures and social isolation which can be encountered on leaving care (Broad 2005). Within the context of wider socio-economic factors like poverty and homelessness, the effects of disadvantage may be heightened for those who have limited support from peers or siblings. In comparison with the relative optimism of those still in care, their comments reflected a greater awareness of such problems. Many of their comments highlighted that they were acutely aware of the difficulties which they were likely to face on leaving care.

Nicky's account, for example, suggested that she felt unprepared, and was very aware of the potential challenges which she could face. The pressure of having to move imminently, as well as concern about being able to cope with all the demands of independent living, came across strongly in her account:

Nicky: *"... placement's meant to stop when I'm sixteen ... I know how to cook, and I know how to clean, you know, it's just ..."*

Researcher: *"Is it just about cooking and cleaning, or is it about ...?"*

Nicky: *"No, it's about how you handle it and stuff, and I don't think I would handle it very well."*

Two young people were very aware of the negative pressure they might experience from their peers, as evidenced by Daniel's and Nicky's comments:

Daniel: *"... I got told by my key worker if anyone in my flat's actually found like any drugs on him, I get arrested for it because I'm the owner of the flat. Can't have them there causing trouble, getting me kicked out ..."*

Nicky: *"My boyfriend and my brothers all talking about moving in with me and stuff, and we'll have to wait and see won't we ..."*

Nicky's account suggested that she had already had to negotiate demands from siblings as well as her boyfriend. Given the pressures which she was already being put under, it was likely that such problems would become more acute at the point of leaving care. Stuart, although not directly referring to problems with siblings after leaving care, had talked earlier in the interview about having to routinely negotiate demands from his older siblings to visit them and lend them money.

The accounts of all three young people reflected the reality for many young people leaving care, both in terms of leaving care with inadequate preparation (Centrepoint 2006), and in terms of the risk of coming under pressure from peers once they have their own accommodation (Broad 2005). Their accounts emphasised the problems which these young people were likely to encounter within their peer relationships after

leaving care, and the subsequent risks of eviction which this could constitute. They also demonstrated that these young people were preparing to live in difficult socio-economic circumstances, and that they had little support to act as a buffer between them and a multitude of social and material problems.

Needing friends after leaving care

As highlighted earlier in the chapter, the young people's expectations of support from friends on leaving care accords with existing research which confirms the role of friends for young care leavers (The Prince's Trust 2002, Children's Rights Director 2006). The young people's accounts from the study also revealed that at the point of preparing to leave care their expectations of support from friends were no less marked than the expectations of those still living in care. Similar themes of the importance of practical support and companionship were reflected in their accounts:

> **Daniel:** *"… but having friends supporting me like in the house that you need to borrow money or something like that … friends are always here to help you … It's really important to have friends. I mean, 'cos you're 'Billy No Mates', you know."*

Nicky and Jade, fostered together at the time of interview, had hoped to live together after leaving care, although this had been ruled out by the local authority. It seemed that there were no imminent plans for Jade to move out of the foster placement, despite being older, although the girls had been given the explanation by the local authority that Jade was *"too old"* for a shared house. Nevertheless, both Jade and Nicky had thought about the benefits of living together:

> **Researcher:** *"So what do you think would be, when you thought about living together what did you think it would be like?"*
>
> **Nicky:** *"I still think we'd go our separate ways, but we'd still have the company, it'd be our house, d'you know what I mean like, our place to stay and ..."*

Jade: *"We'd be in the house together but we'd, I'd be doing work or whatever or I'd be playing football and she'd be in the house watching TV or summat."*

There was a less clear gender divide here compared to the accounts of those still living in care, as Daniel's account referred to both being in a house with friends, and to borrowing money from them. However Nicky's account was specifically about living with a friend, bearing similarities to previously highlighted expectations of both Sophie and Shelley. Nicky and Jade's account did, however, illustrate that wanting to live with a friend could be subject to more barriers than those still in care imagined, in this case being subject to the veto of adults.

The importance of companionship was nevertheless reinforced through Nicky and Jade's account. Despite not being allowed to live together, they were both aware that Nicky would need support:

Jade: *"She knows I'll be popping in every weekend anyway, or a couple of weekends ..."*

Nicky: *"... Oh I'll be like, 'Jade come round'"*

Jade: *I'll be like sorry, doing my homework!"*

Nicky: *"Bring it round here!"*

One of the accounts specifically referred to friends being more important than family:

Researcher: *"...your sister and your brothers and your friends; out of those, who would you say are going to be the most important people for you?*

Stuart: *"It will probably sound cruel but I'll probably see my friend more."*

It has already been acknowledged that Stuart had a complex relationship with his siblings, which may have contributed towards his feelings. However, as found in Chapter Six, for Stuart, friendship had provided him with the extra benefits of membership of a family outside of the care system. Although Stuart felt that his foster carers would be the first ones to help him, he considered that the parents of one

particular friend would be important as well. Here it can be seen that the family of this friend also had the potential to provide significant support after leaving care. The next section will consider the nature and limitations of adult support which young people thought might be provided after leaving care.

These accounts reinforce the importance of friends after leaving care, confirming what is known about the role of friendships in the provision of support (The Prince's Trust 2002), and in contributing to emotional well-being (Dixon 2008), for young people leaving care.

The limitations of adult support after leaving care

There is evidence that foster carers can provide emotional and practical support to young care leavers, and that social workers, whilst being an integral part of planning, can sometimes cause young people to feel unsettled when they do not feel ready to move (Schofield and Ward 2008). Like the group of young people living in care, those preparing to leave care saw foster carers or residential workers as being the adults most likely to support them after leaving care, although friends and the parents of a close friend were also acknowledged in some cases.

The role of foster carers in providing advice and guidance was described by Nicky and Stuart, although Nicky's account listed her friend Jade as equally important:

Researcher: *"So, I mean, who do you think are the most important people, for when you, I mean if you do go on to ..."*

Nicky: *"Pat and Jade, mainly. 'Cause Pat will sign something where she's still responsible for me ..."*

Researcher: *"Like a landlady, that sort of thing?"*

Nicky: *"No, if I need any help with shopping and stuff like that ..."*

In Stuart's account, he felt he had two sets of people to support him, in the form of his foster carers, and the parents of his closest friend:

>**Stuart:** *"Helen and Mike [foster carers] will try and make it easy for me … I believe it will be easier to speak to more people … My friend's parents will do that as well. So I've got two people in hand to settle down and do my own thing, to help me …"*

One young person, Daniel, also referred to the role of a residential worker in supporting him, and, as has been seen previously, providing him with advice about managing relationships with other young people.

Whereas foster carers, residential workers and other adults were referred to in terms of regular practical support, social workers were only mentioned in terms of financial support:

>**Researcher:** *"Is there anything they [social workers and leaving care workers] could do to help you stay in touch with your friends or family?"*
>
>**Nicky:** *"Na, they could just get what I need and that...they could give me a grand..."*
>
>**Stuart:** *"… the after-care people, they could help me to do … like sort out the money if I needed to pay stuff off and that, like insurance or something for it, bills and that."*

Their accounts echoed the views of the young people still living in care, who did not see social workers as having a major role to play in their lives. These accounts did accord with existing research on the practical support provided by young people's previous foster carers. However they also raised a further issue concerning the young people's perceptions of social workers as providing money, but otherwise having a marginal role in their lives.

In general, young people's accounts demonstrated that they anticipated that adults would provide practical support and advice after they left care. What was noticeably absent in these accounts was any expectation that the role of adults would involve providing emotional support and companionship. In contrast, young people's accounts illustrated that they expected relationships with friends and foster siblings to fulfil these

needs, a further example of the importance which these relationships held for the young people concerned.

The reality of life after leaving care

Groundbreaking research in the 1980s emphasised the extent of social and material disadvantage, including relative poverty and constant changes in accommodation, which was present in the lives of children entering care, as well as highlighting that further disadvantage was also present in their lives after leaving care (Stein and Carey 1986). The same study also illustrated how such circumstances could adversely affect young people's personal relationships at both points in their lives. Over twenty years later, care leavers still have to contend with dire socio-economic circumstances, including an increased likelihood of poverty, homelessness and unemployment (Axford 2008). In Chapter Six it was acknowledged that living in care could afford young people a certain degree of protection against material disadvantage. The accounts of the young people leaving care illustrated that this level of protection ended as they left care, and that for them of them, this resulted in having to contend with many material and social problems.

It has been acknowledged within existing research that in addition to such problems, young people leaving care face many challenges in trying to adjust to the practical and emotional demands of independent living (Centrepoint 2006, Children's Rights Director 2006). Chapter Three highlighted the extent to which pathway planning for care leavers continues to be both inadequate, and under-used (Centrepoint 2006, Children's Rights Director 2006, 2009b). Accounts of care leavers in the study echoed these findings and illustrated the multiple problems which they were facing on a daily basis. Whereas those young people living in care were shown to be quite optimistic about the future, and those closer to leaving anticipated some potential problems; the accounts of the three young people who had left care; Hayley, Rebecca and Debbie, revealed the

reality: that they were often coping with many problems, reflecting difficult socio-economic circumstances, while attempting to live independently, maintain relationships of their own and in some cases manage other responsibilities such as supporting siblings or parents.

The strength of relationships with siblings after leaving care

Sibling relationships, particularly those with older siblings, have been found to provide valuable support in terms of practical help, general support, and advice for those leaving care (Wade 2008). It is also known that young people can be more likely to be in contact with a sibling than another family member (The Prince's Trust 2002). Chapter Six highlighted the strength of sibling attachments for young people in care which endured over time. These attachments were shown to continue after leaving care, mostly in the form of a sense of responsibility towards younger siblings, as illustrated in Rebecca and Hayley's accounts. Both young people provided emotional support to their younger siblings, and expressed concern regarding their well-being. Rebecca's account indicated a close caring relationship, following on from the caring responsibilities she had had for her sister before they became looked after:

Rebecca: *"she's my little girlie ... but I mean even if I have about ten kids, or if I hope not, but the door is always open for her, if she wanted to stay or anything … If she's been told off at home then she can come down and like, she phones up and, can I come down? Me and my sister have got this really close relationship which is nice."*

Hayley's account suggested a strong sense of concern for her brother:

Hayley: *"'… cause I'll always be there for him, no matter what, 'cause I don't want to let him down, 'cause he needs someone to help him and I know that there's only a certain limit to what like, I just feel guilty, I feel like I've got to help him, he has no-one"*

She also demonstrated a sense of responsibility towards her sister, whom she felt was well looked after by her foster carers. In both the preceding accounts, the word *'always'* was used by the young people to articulate the nature of the commitment they had to their siblings, suggesting that there was something inviolable about the relationship between them.

Emotional support also had the potential to be provided by younger to older siblings, as illustrated by Hayley, who felt isolated and wanted her younger sister to live with her:

Hayley: *"...I don't really want to live on my own, I'm a bit scared of being on my own with Danny, and Holly hasn't got nowhere to live and I think it would be nice for her to come and live with me..."*

More practical forms of support could also be provided between siblings:

Hayley: *"Just watch telly, pamper each other ... she helps me with Danny, like feed him and stuff, making his dinner and things like that ..."*

Rebecca: *"I suppose she'll be coming to me soon and saying, can you lend us a tenner? Can I stay at yours while I go out and what not?"*

The relationships which Hayley and Rebecca each had with their younger sisters appeared strong, and had the potential to reduce their sense of isolation by providing mutual support into adulthood.

These two accounts of sibling relationships reflect existing knowledge concerning the importance of siblings in providing practical support and advice (Wade 2008). They also illustrated that support could be provided from younger to older siblings, as well as from older siblings to younger ones, as found by Wade (2008). In the context of the likely range of social problems with which young care leavers are forced to contend (Axford 2008), the emotional and practical support available from siblings may be extremely valuable.

Peer relationships after leaving care: opportunities

Existing research suggests that friends can offer significant emotional support to care leavers, and that young people often turn to them for help (The Prince's Trust 2002, Sinclair *et al.* 2005). Friends have also been found to provide benefits in terms of enhancing young people's sense of well-being (Dixon 2008). Young people's accounts substantiated such research, indicating the positive benefits which they were able to access through friendships, including emotional and practical support, and a sense of belonging.

One example concerned Debbie, a particularly isolated young person living alone, with no contact with family, including siblings, who was able to achieve membership of a family through her friendship with three sisters. Her account revealed a new insight into the vital benefits of friendships to young care leavers, in terms of their potential to provide access to family membership within families outside the care system:

> **Debbie:** *"…my friend Holly, there are these three sisters, I've known Michelle for ages, about four years ... but then I started riding down the horses and her little sister rides down there, Jamie … and then like I started getting on with Holly more than … and we've sort of drifted now but I get on with her older sister Michelle as well. So I'm like a whole family friend, they call me Debbie."*

Debbie had experience of violence and abuse from birth family members, and so was very isolated from her birth family, which was in direct contrast to the sense of belonging she felt within her friends' family.

Although the accounts of all three young people were illustrative of support offered by friends, Debbie's account stood out in terms of an extra dimension to the friendship. Debbie, who had become, as she termed it, a *'whole family friend',* had achieved a sense of belonging within the family of three sisters, through having a role in the household:

Debbie: *"… they'd got three laundry baskets on Sunday; we had to sort them all out. I said 'I'm not doing it, I'll sit down, take the dogs for a walk'. So I have jobs and stuff there to do as well, so it's just like a home."*

This was a solitary example of family support which a young care leaver had been able to access through friendship independently of the care system. It also had strong similarities with the experience of another young person still living in care, Stuart, first discussed in Chapter Six, who was also able to access support and belonging through the family of a close friend outside the care system. Both these young people derived their main support from friends, rather than from siblings, with whom they had difficult relationships.

Earlier in the chapter, research evidence concerning the importance of friends after leaving care was highlighted. Certainly the importance of close friendships came across in all three of the young people's accounts. While individually these friendships differed in nature, they all offered benefits to the young people concerned:

Hayley: *"I've got one really good friend, Joanna…she's got a little girl, she's just like me, she's had an unsettled like way of life and stuff, she's had loads of trouble and that, but she's a really good friend to me …"*

Rebecca: *"I have plenty of time sitting with one person crying on my shoulder and I've been crying on her shoulder."*

The comments made by these three young women indicated that friends could offer significant emotional support, as those still in care had anticipated. It was not possible to examine gendered differences in friendships, as all three young people leaving care were female. However, their accounts did point to the considerable sense of well-being (Dixon 2008) promoted within these close female friendships. Debbie's account also represented a significant new insight related to the possibility of being able to access family membership through friends, and the contingent benefits in terms of belonging.

Similarly to sibling relationships, these accounts demonstrated that young care leavers could gain valuable support from friends.

Boyfriends

It is known that some care leavers can find support and a sense of belonging in setting up their own new family (The Prince's Trust 2002, Broad 2005, Sinclair *et al.* 2005). For these care leavers, boyfriends were also shown to be a major part of their lives. In two cases they offered both practical and emotional support, as illustrated by Rebecca's and Debbie's comments:

> **Rebecca:** *"… it's nice as well because he was brought up in the system as well so it's like I can speak about anything because he knows what I'm talking about. So it's good."*

> **Debbie:** *"Andy went to work, my boyfriend, we went for something to eat, he came back and then I had a shower and stuff and just sat and watched the telly upstairs. He went to work at like half eight and I was in bed at half eight, just watching TV and he put the alarm on for me downstairs, because I don't like being on my own."*

Their accounts suggested the benefits which could be gained from relationships with boyfriends, echoing existing research (Broad 2005). In a similar way to relationships with siblings and friends, it can be surmised that relationships with boyfriends can be of added significance in the absence of birth family.

Peer and sibling relationships after leaving care: threats

While there is some evidence to suggest that peers can misuse friendship and cause trouble for those leaving care (Broad 2005), there has been little attention to the impact which conflict within these relationships can have on young people. While in this study friends and boyfriends were shown to provide valuable support after these three young people left care, two of the young people did identify having to manage varying degrees of conflict within their peer relationships, and their accounts revealed the adverse

emotional and material consequences of this. Their accounts also highlighted the adverse effects of having been in care as being played out in such relationships. One account revealed the difficulty of maintaining friendships at a time when a birth parent had come back on the scene after years of being out of contact:

Debbie: *"… because I had a little argument with Millie like last Tuesday and stuff. But I don't know … I spoke to my mum first and then obviously … it's not probably … I don't know. It's not … it is probably my fault as well because I probably wasn't myself when my mum started like phoning me and stuff …. And I just had it all on my head like, why … how does she know where I live, why is she … you know, and all this lot. And obviously I wasn't myself, so that's why it all happened."*

This young person, Debbie, also described the challenge of maintaining a relationship with her boyfriend in the context of coping with events from her past:

Debbie: *"I've only been with Andy like for six months, but he does … he knows. I spoke to him as well the other day, I said things just get on top of me at times and it's just like I don't want to take it out on him or … I don't know, just on the door or something. And it's just … I just pushed him away. It's just mad."*

Where conflict arose with siblings or peers, young people could be left struggling to cope with the resulting pressures. This was demonstrated in the accounts of both Hayley and Debbie. Hayley's account illustrated that the expectations of her siblings, and violence from her boyfriend, resulted in her having to be moved several times. Her comments suggested that she was under severe pressure from both siblings and her boyfriend, which had severe consequences for her:

Hayley: *"... when I come out of foster care I went to Hillside [supported accommodation] and I was in a shared house ... and then they put me in these new flats they've built in ... and I was there for a while, and then I got kicked out because of my little brother and his friends, 'cause he kept bringing his friends around, like drinking and getting all rowdy outside and stuff, so I got kicked out from there, and*

then I went to ... Mother and Baby Unit and I had an argument with my boyfriend and he head butted the door and broke the window so I had to move out of there ... after that I went into bed and breakfast and I've been there ever since, right up until now, and that was about ten months ago, so I've been in bed and breakfast for all that time."

Hayley's account was illustrative of one of the problems likely to face young care leavers: that a lack of social support networks, combined with relative poverty, can mean that losing accommodation can have serious consequences in the form of long term homelessness.

At the time of interview, Hayley had secured a flat of her own. However, the future was still uncertain, and she risked not only homelessness, but also having her son taken into care if problems persisted. She returned to her narrative of problems with accommodation to assert that she had learned from what she perceived to be her past mistakes, and that she was aware of the consequences:

Hayley: *"I've been told if I get kicked out once more then they'll just take him [son] into care and not house me, they'll just leave me, like, and Charlie [brother] don't think like that ... the only way he'd realise is if it actually happened, ... he knows all his mates just take the mick and stuff and they just use him and want a house to drink in and stuff, but I ain't never going to let anything like that happen again, because it's just stupid."*

Debbie's account similarly illustrated serious problems which had resulted from conflict with one of her peers. Her comments revealed that the problems had started with a violent argument with her housemate, another young care leaver, which resulted in the other girl being evicted, leaving Debbie struggling to live in the house on her own:

Debbie: *"I used to come from school and do the washing, her washing, the cooking, the ironing, the cleaning and do everything for her. And then when I said for her to start doing it, she just lost it and started going mad at me and like we had a few fights*

in here … in the June, we hadn't spoken for a month and then she just come downstairs and saw me in the kitchen … I went 'what are you doing' and then she just like schized out and went mad at me and grabbed the knife to me. And then I pushed her and she fell to the floor, I grabbed the knife and then I got her and told her to go away from me and she kept on hitting me and stuff. And then I pinned her up against the wall and chucked her out of the house. And then she got me arrested for me defending myself basically … it's bad vibes in the house, I don't like it, I don't like the atmosphere and I don't like coming … I just don't like coming back to it."

Debbie subsequently returned to this event during the course of the interview, demonstrating the significant impact it had had on her, increasing her sense of isolation, and affecting her ability to concentrate on her college work. Her repeated discussion of the event suggests that it was a traumatic experience:

Debbie: *"…I have a shit day here at college and I hate it, and I go back home to somewhere that [someone] tried to stab me, somewhere that I don't like to be, somewhere that I'm not happy with, I can't concentrate … I can't do my coursework here."*

The accounts of both Debbie and Hayley reflected existing research concerning the potential for peers to exert a negative influence on young care leavers, for example by taking advantage of their accommodation or money (Dixon and Stein 2005). However they went further in illustrating the extensive and serious nature of the threats to well-being represented by the breakdown of peer and sibling relationships, such as eviction, homelessness, removal of a child, violence and the disruption of education.

Pregnancy and early motherhood

Early parenthood has been both a historical (Biehal and Wade 1996), and a more recent concern arising from the significant numbers of young care leavers becoming pregnant (Department for Children, Schools and Families 2009a). While teenage pregnancy has

been widely perceived as a social problem, research with young mothers has found that they actively resist this perception, and instead view their role as one of responsibility and care (Rolfe 2008). The accounts of the three care leavers represented three different viewpoints on the subject. Debbie hoped that having a family would in the future provide her with the love and sense of belonging she had not found while in care:

> **Debbie:** *"I've always wanted to live in a family that loved me and all that lot and now, it's just … I've got to wait until I have my own because it's just too late now, there's no point …"*

Her feelings were similar to those expressed by several of the young people still in care.

Rebecca, who had a boyfriend and was expecting her first child, referred to a sense of purpose in her life, and a determination to be a good mother:

> **Rebecca:** *"…my life is sort of planned out now and I've got like this little one to think about now, so, and I mean I've always made this promise that I'm not going to break. Because my mum, my mum was put in foster care and then we were and I've made a promise that I'll never let my children go into foster care, so, I'll keep that."*

Hayley, who was the only one of the study participants with a child, spoke about the difficulties of promoting contact between her son, his father and his half-sister, as well as the problems involved in trying to maintain a relationship with her son's father.

> **Hayley:** *"His dad has him now and again as well, so that's good. He's got really good contact with his dad. He's got a little sister as well, Danny has, but it's not to me, it's with some other girl. She's one ... but he loves his little sister."*
>
> **Researcher**: *"Do they see each other sometimes?"*
>
> **Hayley:** *"Well me and the other baby's mum don't really get on. I don't stop Danny from going to see his sister, but she's so petty, she like don't like her daughter around me, so I let Peter take him down to see her, but we don't get on, we just argue when we see each other. We've never got*

on 'cause she's still, "Peter wants to be with me", but she wants to be with him and so we're just like at war at the moment."

These accounts suggested that having a family could be important, providing a sense of belonging and of purpose, echoing accounts of young mothers as responsible and caring (Rolfe 2008). However, Hayley's account demonstrated that the reality of living as a young mother also had the potential to be extremely challenging, and could involve complex negotiations within several peer relationships.

The importance of emotional and practical support from adults

Research has recognised the importance of mentors in supporting young people leaving care (Clayden and Stein 2005). It has also been found that where family relationships are problematic, friendships can take on greater importance (Broad 2005). The accounts of those young people who had left care indicated that adult support could be valuable in certain circumstances. However, for one young person who had limited or no access to support from siblings, the need for emotional support from adults appeared to be heightened. As discussed earlier, having a strong friendship could provide significant support in the form of access to that friend's family. In Debbie's case, this meant the availability of essential emotional support from her friend's mother:

Debbie: *"Because sometimes I have really crap days at college and I just think 'what's the point', that's why I just go back to Michelle's house and get a big fat hug [from her mum]."*

Debbie had talked about spending most of her time at this particular house, and the acceptance which she evidently gained from the mother of these three friends, (of which Michelle was one) was vital to her sense of belonging. Debbie also received limited support from an adult friend, although she could not always afford to contact her:

Debbie: *There's only like Louise [adult friend], which I've hardly ever got any credit to say 'oh Louise, what does this say, whatever, whatever; who have I got?"*

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By contrast, the other two young people received positive family support, from various relatives. Hayley received practical support from both parents, especially her mother. Prior to the interview, Rebecca referred to specific help provided by her grandparents in setting up her flat and helping her get ready for the birth of her baby, and her grandparents also called in briefly during the interview. Although Hayley appeared to have many more complications in her life than Rebecca, at the time of interview both girls talked in positive terms about their lives, and also had close relationships with siblings which provided mutual support and a sense of belonging. By contrast, Debbie had no sibling support, and appeared to suffer from a very low sense of emotional well-being:

> **Debbie:** *"I just lost interest in everything and just like … well other than the horses, they're the only thing that kept me on the surface."*

The accounts of all three care leavers illustrated the need for emotional and practical support. They demonstrated that where the young people had good family support, and some good sibling and peer relationships, they talked in more positive terms about their lives. However Debbie's isolation revealed a need for some consistent alternative means of support for young people with limited family support. For young people like her, some kind of flexible support which encompassed evenings and weekends, and was able to provide some form of companionship and advice, could be beneficial. This supports the findings of research by Clayden and Stein (2005), which has recognised the role of peers as mentors for young care leavers. Although these authors specifically recommend peer mentoring, it could also be a role fulfilled by adults in some situations.

Conclusion

This chapter provided confirmatory evidence as to the value of sibling support after leaving care, and the ability of sibling relationships to offer young people a sense of familial identity. The accounts also confirmed that friends could provide significant

support after leaving care. The importance of setting up their own families was a strong theme across young people's accounts, confirming what is known about the benefits which young care leavers can derive from having a family of their own.

The differences in participants' ages and situations meant that it was possible within this chapter to compare the accounts of young people still in care with those who had left. Consequently the extent of the gap between young people's expectations of life after care, and the reality of life after care, could be explored. This gave this study an advantage over existing studies related to leaving care which are mostly retrospective in nature.

The young people's accounts revealed a stark contrast between the expectation and the reality of leaving care. A strong theme in the accounts of those still in care was a high level of optimism about life after leaving care. This was reflected in the expectation that sibling relationships would be easy to maintain, as they would be free from the constraints imposed by being looked after, and that they would provide both social contact and material support. Some young people expected to have boyfriends and families of their own, which they saw as an important means of support. Friends were also expected to provide support and companionship.

The accounts also revealed much greater understanding of the benefits which could be derived from close friends after leaving care, including emotional and practical support. A particularly significant new insight concerned the way in which membership of a family outside the care system could be accessed through friends. In this chapter, family membership was shown to provide vital emotional and practical support in the absence of such support from siblings, thereby reducing the risk of social exclusion. It echoed a similar finding from Chapter Six with regard to the benefits of family membership accessed through friends for young people living in care. These accounts illustrated the value of alternative forms of support for young people with little or no available support

from siblings or other family members, as well as demonstrating the benefits which could be provided through families outside of the care system.

Those young people preparing to leave care envisaged that friends would be important, in the provision of financial and emotional support, and companionship. However, they also expressed worries about not being able to cope with independent living. Very real concerns also emerged from their accounts, related to potential isolation, and to the negative pressures which siblings or friends might exert. They also expected to get practical support in the form of finance from social workers, and emotional support and practical guidance from foster carers.

The accounts of those young people who had left care demonstrated that they were doing their best to maintain relationships with siblings and peers in the context of significant material and social disadvantage in the form of homelessness, isolation, and violence. Their accounts provided new insights into the ways in which circumstances of multiple disadvantage, which had been present in their lives as they entered care, could also be present in their lives after leaving care. In addition, young people often had little social support, and were attempting to manage conflict within sibling and peer relationships on their own terms, which sometimes resulted in serious threats to their emotional and physical well-being.

However, the accounts also revealed that where sibling relationships had endured over time in care, at the point of leaving care, and afterwards, siblings were able to provide each other with valuable support on an emotional and a practical level. Such relationships could also involve a significant degree of commitment to the future well-being of siblings, and were sometimes presented as inviolable. This illustrates the potential of sibling relationships to provide valuable support for care leavers not just at the point of leaving care, but for many years to come.

This chapter identifies a need for practice with young people in care to begin to address the realities of life after leaving care, in order to better prepare young care leavers for the problems they are likely to encounter. This could include making social workers and carers more aware of the realities in social and material circumstances for care leavers, and the pressures which young people may face within their social networks. The findings also highlight the importance of keeping young people in care for longer in order to ensure they are better prepared when they do eventually leave.

In view of the obvious potential of sibling and peer relationships to provide valuable support after leaving care and well into adulthood, there are also implications for supporting children and young people to maintain and strengthen positive sibling and peer relationships while in care. Greater attention could also be paid to supporting young people in managing their relationships with siblings and peers both at the point of leaving care, and as young care leavers.

Chapter Eight
Conclusions and recommendations

Introduction

This thesis has investigated the meaning and significance of sibling and peer relationships for looked after children from their own perspectives, at the point of care entry, during their time in care, and after leaving public care. This concluding chapter recapitulates the key aspects of the theoretical and conceptual framework which formed the basis for the empirical enquiry, identifying how this framework led to the design of a methodology and subsequent fieldwork which prioritised the views of looked after young people on their sibling and peer relationships. It then outlines the main benefits of this methodological framework, as well as its limitations. The remainder of this chapter sets out the significance of the key findings of the thesis in relation to existing research, followed by their implications for the future development of practice, policy and research.

Theorising children's relationships

The thesis' exploration of the research, policy and practice literature concerning children's peer and sibling relationships, with particular reference to looked after children, was located within a sociological and post structural framework, which allowed for the privileging of children and young people's standpoint. This framework was further informed by complementary feminist and anti-oppressive approaches. It also recognised children's ability to influence or change adult decisions regarding their relationships, albeit within the context of their marginalisation as looked after children.

The literature review demonstrated that pervasive ideas from within a developmental paradigm have been responsible for a focus on adult-child relationships, notably in terms of children's' attachment to key adult figures, and from the perspective of adults (Bowlby 1973, Mauthner 2005). It found that this has contributed to a lack of knowledge

concerning children's relationships with each other, including from their own perspectives. It further found that historically this has limited understanding within the research literature of the importance of sibling and peer relationships in the provision of emotional well-being, support and social inclusion for looked after children (Berridge 1997, Timms and Thoburn 2003). The review also highlighted the importance of such knowledge in the light of the impact of long periods in care on such relationships, and the lack of consultation with looked after children on the issue.

In the light of these considerations the thesis recognised that a developmental approach was not sufficient to explore the sibling and peer relationships of looked after children, and that alternative theoretical approaches were also needed. In doing so, the literature review found that critical studies of childhood have begun to produce a body of knowledge to counteract this lack of understanding of children's inter-relationships (Jenks 2005, Loreman 2009). Sociological approaches to children's lives have recognised that children's relationships with each other are important and valuable in their own right, and that children need to be consulted about these relationships (Boyden and Mann 2005, Mayall 2005). The review also drew out that although children can also act to influence situations in their own interests (James and James 2004, Lee 2005); any exploration of children's relationships needs to be contextualised by recognition of the structural oppressions which can impact on those relationships. Synthesising sociological, post structural and feminist approaches enabled the thesis to explore both the importance of a children's standpoint, and the effects of unequal power relations on their lives and relationships with each other.

The literature review further examined the research evidence related to looked after children and their relationships, demonstrating that as children became and remained looked after, many of their sibling and peer relationships were altered or severed (Schofield and Beek 2005, Children's Rights Director 2009b). It revealed a picture of complex loss and change in sibling and peer relationships for children and young people

in and leaving care. The review suggested that many of these relationships were of crucial importance to them, but were being lost through circumstances over which children had little or no control. It further found that children entered care from circumstances of multiple social disadvantage, and that disadvantage and inequality were also affecting the lives of children while living in care. In addition, it was revealed that on leaving care, young people were encountering further disadvantaged circumstances in terms of unemployment, homelessness and poverty (Axford 2008). The research evidence also demonstrated that although there was a growing awareness of the importance of gaining children's perspectives, this was often restricted to large-scale consultations (Children's Rights Director 2009a), which were unable to explore in any depth either the importance of sibling and peer relationships or the impact of their loss.

The review therefore established a clear rationale for further research into the sibling and peer relationships of looked after children from their own perspectives. It also paved the way for the thesis to employ a methodology based on a participatory approach to working with young people, which has on a small scale contributed the perspectives of a marginalised group of young people to debates about their lives. Research questions emanating from the thesis' focus explored looked after young people's views on the importance of peer and sibling relationships for their well-being, the impact of the loss within their sibling and peer relationships, and the extent to which young people felt able to challenge decisions with regard to these relationships. The role of adults in promoting or restricting sibling and peer relationships was explored, and the role of siblings and peers for young people leaving care was also considered.

Methodology and methods

Consistent with its theoretical standpoint, the thesis' methodology and research methods reflected a concern to work within a child-focused participatory approach, through privileging children as social actors (James *et al.* 2005). It also drew on feminist

and post structural approaches in order to further refine understanding of the dimensions of power which exist between children and adults (Goodley *et al.* 2004, Edwards *et al.* 2006). In addressing issues of power and agency, the methodology therefore recognised the importance of acknowledging the power of the adult researcher. It was recognised that the researcher had a responsibility to allow children's voices to be heard (Wyness 2006), and that this was particularly important in regard to looked after young people, whose views on their sibling and peer relationships had not received sufficient priority within existing literature. The methodology also took account of existing research, for example McLeod (2007) and Kay *et al.* (2009), regarding the issues and challenges of working with children and young people.

The fieldwork conducted for the study involved carrying out qualitative interviews with looked after young people, which specifically explored the meaning of their sibling and peer relationships, and the consequences of their loss. As part of a participatory approach, focus groups were used in order to gain young people's views to inform and direct the research questions. In addition, the use of a topic-led interview schedule enabled the interview process to reflect young people's own priorities within the overall framework of the study. Following the young person's lead, the research interview was able to trace young people's narratives of experiences sometimes over many years, as well as enabling them to talk about the range of relationships which they considered important.

The study comprised a small scale sample, which included a range of ages, as well as two participants with learning disabilities and two of minority ethnic origin. Within the findings chapters, it was noted that material disadvantage, while present in the young people's lives as they entered care, featured less prominently in their accounts of life during care. Instead, the accounts of those living in care revealed aspects of social disadvantage such as ageist power relations and social isolation. Nevertheless, it was very evident that problems such as poverty and homelessness rose to the surface on

leaving care, suggesting that living in care did not afford young people long term protection against material disadvantage.

The study was limited by only being able to achieve partial representation of diversity by way of participants of minority ethnicity origin or with disabilities. It was also restricted by only being able to provide a retrospective account of care entry, rather than interviewing young people before and after entering care. The use of a topic based schedule, while offering young people a degree of control, also meant that there was not absolute consistency in terms of covering the same areas with each participant. However, as highlighted earlier, this was part of an overall commitment within the methodology to a participatory approach with young people.

Key findings

The importance of caring for and about siblings

The young people's accounts demonstrated that relationships with siblings were of crucial significance to their emotional well-being throughout their experience of care, and were recognised as such. The young people's accounts described strong sibling attachments, which were characterised by a sense of caring for and caring about siblings. It was demonstrated that such relationships had often existed prior to care entry, and that they had a capacity to endure in spite of separations which occurred at the point of care entry. Such caring took the form of providing diverse forms of emotional and practical support both during and after leaving care, which was of great benefit to both the caring, and cared for, sibling.

Existing research has generated little knowledge in this area, therefore the significance for looked after children of siblings caring for and about each other has not been fully recognised. The study therefore provides fresh insights into the importance of the caring roles which are formed in early childhood, before children enter care, and which

continue into adulthood. It highlights the need to recognise the importance of these roles for young people, and support them in maintaining such roles in appropriate ways, while living in care.

The symbolic significance of sibling relationships

Although direct face to face contact with siblings was considered extremely important by looked after young people, there was also a strong sibling bond between those who had never met, or who had had little contact. In this way, sibling relationships were shown to be capable of transcending changes in time and place, and to be imbued with an importance which was not diminished through separation or loss. The accounts further revealed that having siblings could help to reinforce a young person's sense of individual and familial identity. Sibling relationships could enable young people to place themselves within, and feel part of, their birth family, in the face of severe disruption within wider family relationships.

These findings concerning the qualities of sibling relationships build on existing research, both confirming the importance of sibling relationships for young people in care, and extending what is known about them. The findings demonstrate that the strength of sibling relationships in the face of separation and loss for looked after children may have been underestimated. They also emphasise the importance of such relationships in supporting a young person's sense of identity, at a time when they are separated from their birth family. These findings suggest that much more attention should be paid to recognising the wide-ranging significance of a variety of sibling relationships for looked after young people, in the course of supporting them in maintaining their sibling relationships during their time in care.

The significance of relationships with other related children

The study found that in addition to sibling relationships, some young people had close relationships with nieces and nephews which they considered to be important. Young people considered these relationships to have some of the same qualities as sibling

relationships. They valued contact with these children, as well as wanting to have information about their progress. This finding builds on existing evidence which has found that looked after children can form 'sibling type' relationships with other related children when living with them (Tarren-Sweeney and Hazell 2005). The accounts also highlighted a previously unexplored issue concerning the impact of the loss of such relationships. When older siblings moved to independence, this could result in the consequential loss of nieces and nephews, which was keenly felt. This provides new evidence as to the importance of familial relationships with children other than siblings for looked after children, and also has implications with regard to contact arrangements.

The role of friendships in accessing family membership and emotional support

In addition to sibling relationships, young people's accounts clearly demonstrated the importance of peer relationships, in the form of friendships, in the maintenance of emotional well-being for looked after young people during and after leaving care.

A significant finding related to friendship was the opportunity for young people to access membership of a family outside the care system through a close friend. Young people's accounts contained two powerful examples of this, showing that they benefited in many ways, including the experience of 'ordinary' family life, the feeling of belonging, and the support of the friend's parents. Where this occurred after leaving care, and there was also no contact with siblings, it was found to offer especially vital support.

A further finding related to friendship was the need for young people to have sufficient time to build connections, and to invest emotionally in friendships. Both during and after leaving care, close friendships were shown to offer young people significant emotional support and companionship. While both these findings are to an extent confirmatory of the importance of friends in the lives of looked after children, they also provide significant insights into the benefits of family membership and emotional support which friends can provide while living in care, as well as the need for a degree of stability to

enable the formation of close friendships. They highlight the need to help young people to sustain close friendships during their time in care. They also illustrate the challenges facing young people in their attempts to establish close friendships within an environment of constant change.

The traumatic nature of the loss of sibling relationships through adoption

Young people's accounts revealed many losses of contact with siblings and friends which had occurred since their entry into care, bearing out existing research evidence presented in Chapter Three, that loss within sibling and peer relationships is a major consequence of entering and remaining in care (Schofield and Beek 2005, Children's Rights Director 2009b). However, most notable was the devastating loss of siblings to adoption sustained by many of these young people, and the traumatic nature of the separation which this represented.

None of those with adopted siblings had contact with them, and their accounts revealed feelings of sadness, anger, frustration as well as a sense of injustice at the loss. While existing research evidence details some accounts by children concerning the loss of their siblings through adoption, they do not explore the nature of the traumatic effect which it has on siblings. Within this study, there was also only one example of a young person asserting their views regarding the adoption of a sibling within the legal process, which is symptomatic of the unequal power relations relating to looked after children, in which adoption related decisions are made by adults.

Therefore the accounts from the study provide significant new insights into the traumatic impact on looked after children of the adoption of their siblings. They also reveal new understanding of the powerlessness and lack of voice experienced by young people in care in relation to the adoption of their siblings.

Young people's active role in maintaining and negotiating sibling and peer relationships

Despite their relative powerlessness, a crucial dimension running through all the stages of care was young people's determination to manage their own relationships with their siblings and peers. The young people's accounts were often characterised by a sense of self reliance, and they were shown to be actively engaged in maintaining their sibling and peer relationships with little adult guidance. For many of the young people, this involved sustaining existing relationships, one example of which has been previously identified in relation to siblings caring for and about each other. It could also involve making new friendships which offered mutual support. Further, it could mean managing complexities and challenges within relationships. For example, while living in care, young people often had to negotiate relationships which they knew would be transitory, on a day to day basis, and in such circumstances they had chosen to avoid emotional investment in order to protect themselves against future loss.

When looking ahead to leaving care, some young people were optimistic about the ease of managing their sibling and peer relationships, while those for whom leaving care was approaching, anticipated potential problems and pressures they might face. The accounts of those young people who had left care revealed that living in circumstances of considerable social disadvantage amplified the problems which they encountered in their relationships with siblings and peers. Violent encounters and pressures to use their accommodation involving both siblings and peers were shown to represent serious threats to the emotional and physical well-being of young care leavers, and could result in eviction, homelessness, difficulty focusing on education, or the risk of the removal of a young person's child. However, young people were also able to form strong friendships which offered them mutual support and companionship, as seen earlier. Young people's accounts strongly emphasised their determination to negotiate their sibling and peer relationships despite also contending with many other external pressures.

Existing literature has found that children and young people consider sibling and peer relationships to be important both during and after leaving care. It is also known that in some situations young people can experience pressures from peers which can put them at risk. However, the findings from this study reveal the active role which young people have in maintaining their relationships, and their determination to do so even in the face of separation, loss and severe socio-economic difficulties. In addition, as this study was able to consider the views of those living in care as well as those who had left care, the findings also highlight the gap between the expectation and the reality of leaving care in terms of the ease with which young people expected to manage their sibling and peer relationships, and the major challenges which they faced in reality. The accounts of those leaving care also provide fresh insights into the ways in which early social disadvantage implicated in reception into care continues to be replicated in the lives of young care leavers. In addition, they also clearly indicate the extent to which such problems can affect young people's sibling and peer relationships.

The role of adults in facilitating or constraining sibling relationships, and providing support

Young people's accounts revealed that they saw adults as having been responsible both for promoting their relationships with siblings, and in some cases severing them. Foster carers were seen as the only adults to play a major role in facilitating these relationships, mostly through the encouragement of informal contact at foster homes. The accounts of those who had left care suggested that adults had less involvement in supporting their relationships at that stage, and that instead, young people tended to be actively engaged in maintaining their own sibling and peer relationships. However, it was also revealed that the parents of close friends could provide valuable support, and therefore findings from the study also emphasised the vital nature of adult or peer mentors in providing support for young people who did not have access to sufficient support from friends or siblings.

Although it is known that foster carers are often involved in organising contact for looked after siblings, this study reveals greater information about the informal nature of such contact, in identifying situations where young people were able to visit their siblings at other foster carers' homes whenever they chose. The study also found that where siblings had been adopted without arrangements for ongoing contact, young people held social workers and adoptive carers responsible for having severed their relationships with siblings. Their accounts indicated the powerful position of these adults: social workers had explained that they were not allowed to have any further contact with their siblings, and adoptive parents had, in their eyes, taken their siblings and stopped any further contact. Some of the accounts stood out in terms of the anger expressed towards adoptive parents, whom young people felt had no right to take children who were someone's brother or sister.

Existing research has demonstrated the powerful position of adopters with relation to decisions about contact between siblings post adoption, however it has not addressed the way in which this is perceived by looked after children whose siblings have been adopted. Neither has research addressed the views of young people about the role of social workers in the adoption process. This study, grounded in young people's accounts, is therefore informative, about a key dimension to the adoption process, the ways in which young people experience and interpret the powerful position of adults within the adoption process.

Practice implications

The findings emerging from this thesis have implications both for practice generally with looked after children, as well as being relevant to specific practice initiatives in the area. Work on the thesis commenced at a time of longstanding historical concerns about the lives of looked after children, as well as the longer term outcomes for them. During the period of time over which it has been completed, there have been a number of new

practice initiatives (discussed in the following section), which are engaged in seeking to address issues regarding looked after children's lives, and to an extent, their relationships. Some of these contain valuable possibilities for supporting young people in maintaining positive sibling and peer relationships. The findings from this study are, therefore highly relevant to recent changes both in policy and in practice.

Working with looked after children

Evidence from the study has highlighted the strength and enduring nature of sibling relationships during care, as well as the significant benefits which they can provide, and suggests that more attention could be paid to supporting and maintaining such relationships within social work practice. This could involve a more thorough assessment of children's key sibling and peer relationships via the assessment process at the point of entering care. It could also mean elevating the importance of sibling and peer relationships within life story work with looked after children. Evidence from the study shows that the young people were active agents engaged in defining and negotiating relationships against very difficult odds. This could also be of relevance to practice, in encouraging practitioners to recognise and relate to children as co-workers in this respect. As the study has also identified the specific benefits of roles of care between siblings, there are also practice implications for work with both caring, and cared for, siblings in terms of recognising and fostering those relationships.

Recent initiatives such as the Social Work Practices (Department for Children, Schools and Families 2008c), if successful, may provide a new model for working with looked after children in which social workers are enabled to spend more time in direct work with children, thus establishing a more detailed picture of their significant relationships. Knowledge of the importance of friendships may also assist field social workers, as well as foster carers and residential workers, in supporting young people to develop positive connections with their peers. It may also help them to recognise the challenges for young people who are living in an environment where transitory relationships are

commonplace. This would, however, involve a combination of careful assessment and direct work with the young people concerned.

Placements and carers

Young people's accounts revealed the vital importance of length of time and therefore stability in helping them to form strong friendships. This has direct relevance to developing practice, given the evidence from the literature review concerning the transitory nature of friendships for young people in care as a result of frequent placement moves. Potential practice implications include keeping short term or emergency placements separate from long term ones. This might enable looked after children who are placed together to form stronger relationships over time. The recent Staying Put pilot (Department for Children, Schools and Families 2008b), enabling young people to remain in foster care past the age of eighteen, may indirectly contribute to sustaining relationships between young people if they remain in placement together for longer. In addition, recognition of the benefits which can be gained from membership of families outside of the care system could be used to raise awareness of the value of wider friendship networks for young people in care. Young people could be actively encouraged to join in activities outside the foster home or residential placement which might facilitate the formation of new friendships.

Where siblings are placed together initially, and then the placement is disrupted for one child, a temporary respite placement could be considered for that sibling in order to allow time for direct work with the siblings to address problems and attempt to reunite them. This could result in some siblings being only temporarily, rather than permanently, separated through the care system. In view of the recognised role of foster carers in supporting the sibling relationships of young people in the study, the role of foster carers in promoting and maintaining contact could also potentially be enhanced, through additional training, related to highlighting the importance of maintaining such contact.

Maintaining contact

The findings from the study emphasise the value of face to face contact between separated siblings as a means of strengthening their relationships. The significance of siblings who care for and about each other also needs to be more fully addressed through practice both with carers and cared for children. Those children who have cared for younger siblings before entering care could be supported in continuing to do so, within a supportive environment where the appropriate limits of such care were recognised. This would involve careful joint working between social workers, link workers and carers. Planning for both the nature and the extent of direct and indirect contact would need to take account of the strength of such relationships, as well as acknowledging their continued importance to children who had been cared for. This could potentially involve new ways of arranging contact which could take account of the importance of such caring relationships, such as an older sibling being able to attend a younger siblings' school play for example.

When planning for contact for looked after children, this could also involve careful assessment of which relationships children consider important, in order to ensure that significant relationships are not missed. This would enable consideration of the importance of all their sibling and peer relationships, including those with friends, and with other related children. This could be done by direct work with children, after the point of entering care. There may be potential for the development of a framework designed to specifically assess looked after children's sibling and peer relationships, in order to ascertain to whom they are closest, and to assist with the planning of contact. It should, however be recognised that any contact arrangements will be constrained by the resources and funding of local authorities concerned.

Adoption

In view of the major impact of losses sustained by children when their siblings are adopted, there are a number of implications for practice in this area. There is an argument for revisiting the purpose of objectives aimed at increasing the number of adoptions (Department of Health 2001, 2002). The findings also suggest a need to review the appropriateness of adoption in individual cases. This could take into account consideration of the child's sibling relationships, as well as the likelihood of any direct contact between them post adoption. There may be a need to revisit the potential of foster care as an alternative permanency option for young people who risk being separated from siblings. Careful consideration would, however, need to be given to the ability of individual placements to provide long-term stability and security, alongside weighing up the risks of contact from birth family members.

The recent initiative Right2BCared4 (Department for Children, Schools and Families 2008b), which gives children some rights in terms of advocacy related to when they leave care, is an important step forward in recognising that young people often have little opportunity to be heard. However, the provision of advocacy for looked after children remains limited. Advocacy would benefit far more children if it were available to them in any situations where they wished to put their views concerning separation from siblings. It could, for instance, be used as a powerful tool for young people to put their view to the courts when a sibling is to be adopted, enabling them to convey the serious nature of the impact upon them.

Furthermore, within the area of adoption preparation and assessment, more could be done to increase the awareness of potential adopters to the importance, and the long term significance, of sibling attachments. If such issues were elevated in the discussion alongside existing awareness of the importance of contact with and/or knowledge about birth parents for adopted children, it might assist potential adoptive parents in understanding the importance of sibling contact post adoption.

After care support

Findings from the study concerning the value of supportive sibling and peer relationships for care leavers point to ways in which social work could be developed here. Where young people have stable friendships, these could be recognised as part of the pathway planning process in terms of a young person's future support networks. These friendships, and in some cases, the added benefit of family membership, may provide more sustainable support than professional agencies for care leavers over the longer term. It is possible that practice initiatives like the Staying Put pilot (Department for Children, Schools and Families 2008b) referred to earlier, may indirectly strengthen friendships of benefit to young care leavers, if young people have been in the same placement for some time. The use of mentors could also be considered as an alternative means of support for those young people who have little or no support from peers or siblings.

Planning for care leavers also needs to take account of the worrying findings from the study in relation to the negative effects of some peer relationships. Increased recognition of the vulnerability of these young people, and the risks to their well-being which can result from problems within peer relationships is a first step in improving the conditions for young care leavers. Support and guidance from carers and social workers may be needed to help young people learn to cope with such relationships as they enter adulthood. The noticeable gap between the expectations of young care leavers and the reality of leaving care, highlighted in this study, suggests that more robust preparation of care leavers could benefit them in the period of transition to independent living.

Housing is another clear priority for care leavers, given the relationship between appropriate housing and success in education or employment (Social Exclusion Task Force 2009). The importance of key workers to offer support on a range of housing problems, currently available to other disadvantaged groups through the Supporting

People services (Social Exclusion Task Force 2009), has been recognised by some local authority areas and provided to care leavers. Such provision could be extended countrywide in order to support all care leavers in moving to independent living.

It has also been identified that young pregnant women are amongst those care leavers who will require extra guidance and support (Department for Education and Skills 2007). However, there are as yet no legal or policy provisions guaranteeing services for them as a result. Given the study evidence on the vulnerability of young mothers to long term homelessness and to having their children taken into care, it is argued that services should be targeted specifically at this group of young women, in recognition of the additional pressures they face on leaving care, and the subsequent challenges they face in order to parent their children.

Practice initiatives developed in the voluntary sector

Since the research questions for this thesis were first developed, there has been a gradual increase in awareness of the importance of sibling relationships through consultation with looked after children, as discussed in Chapter Three, and this has been paralleled within the voluntary sector. The recent initiative, Siblings Together, (Siblings Together 2008) has raised awareness of the plight of siblings separated through the care system, and has organised camps and activity weeks to promote bonds between separated siblings. It is currently available to looked after siblings and care leavers, as well as those in kinship care (who are currently offered free places), and adoptive placements across the country. As reported in Chapter Three, young people who have attended camps have spoken positively about spending time with their siblings. This is an important new initiative in the light of the key finding concerning the importance and duration of sibling bonds. It also resonates with what the study has revealed about activity and talking being vital elements of sustaining sibling relationships when children are separated through living in care. However the Siblings Together initiative has limited funding, and relies heavily on donations for facilities and

materials, as well as on volunteer helpers. The findings from this thesis therefore suggest the need for serious consideration to be given to consolidating such provisions through more extensive funding.

Policy implications

The most recent policy changes which relate to looked after children are to be found in the Children and Young Persons Act 2008, in the areas of improving placement stability and educational outcomes for children in care. The Act has broad aims related to the provision by local authorities of sufficient and appropriate accommodation, including the requirement to consider the location of a child's home and the need to accommodate siblings together. This may assist in ensuring that the impact of entering care on children's sibling and peer networks is reduced. The Act also recognises the value of kinship care placements for children, in requiring consideration of placement with relatives and friends in preference to foster carers, as well as granting relatives the right to apply for residence orders or special guardianship orders where a child has lived with them continuously for a year preceding the application. Residence orders enable children to be placed with relatives, whereas special guardianship orders make further provisions for the delegation of some aspects of parental responsibility to relatives with whom a child resides.

These provisions may be beneficial in assisting children to remain living with, or in close contact with, their siblings, as well as to maintain contact with local friends. They are significant in the light of the study's findings concerning the importance for looked after children of maintaining relationships with siblings and peers. However, it should also be borne in mind that these measures are unlikely to be sufficient to prevent the attrition in relationships which the study has shown can occur throughout children's time in care. Other related measures would make a greater impact, such as increasing the numbers of foster carers who have the skills and the capacity to accommodate sibling groups,

and increased consideration of the role of small group residential placements for sibling groups.

The Children and Young Persons Act 2008 also strengthens the position of Independent Reviewing Officers, by enabling them to monitor the performance of the local authority related to a child's case, to ensure that the local authority is aware of the child's wishes and feelings, and if necessary to refer the case to an officer of the Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service. These provisions may allow children to have increased input into decisions concerning their lives, through having adults to represent their views to the local authority. However, the Act does not specify who can be an Independent Reviewing Officer, meaning that this function can continue to be carried out by employees of the local authority. If the role was fully independent of the local authority, this would ensure that looked after children had the best possible chance for independent representation of their views. This is directly relevant to the need demonstrated by the study for young people to have increased representation of their views in situations where they are being separated from siblings against their wishes, as in the case of adoption.

The Act also requires local authorities to appoint a personal adviser to assist looked after young people with education and training. While this is to be welcomed, findings from the study clearly indicate that the problems of young care leavers extend well beyond issues connected to their education. Although the study found that young people were often engaged in maintaining their own sibling and peer relationships after leaving care, the evidence also suggested that this could be extremely challenging, indicating the need for the availability of adult support and guidance in the area of interpersonal relationships. Young care leavers could therefore benefit from additional support in all areas of their lives, which could be provided either by adults or by peer mentors.

The study findings related to the problems encountered by young care leavers also provide a strong endorsement for the raising of the leaving care age within current policy. In this respect, the Staying Put pilots (Department for Children, Schools and Families 2008b), discussed earlier, which have been instigated as part of the provisions of the Children and Young Persons Act 2008, do not go far enough, and will only be effective if they are used to inform discussions about the vulnerability of all young care leavers and the need to allow them to stay longer in care.

Evidence from the thesis also suggests that in view of the losses of siblings to adoption, the current presumption in favour of no contact between siblings post adoption as embodied in the Adoption and Children Act 2002 needs to be revisited. Further endorsement of the importance of such a measure is provided by recent evidence from children's consultations that children perceive seeing brothers and sisters as a right (Children's Rights Director 2010).

In 2009, a report published by the House of Commons Children, Schools and Families Committee (Children, Schools and Families Committee 2009) examined longstanding concerns relating to the lives of children in care, as well as investigating whether proposed governmental reforms would be sufficient to address such concerns. The Committee highlighted several areas in which it felt more could be done to benefit looked after children and care leavers, including a national assessment of placement supply within foster care, increased consideration of residential care as a resource, and a recommendation that all young people remain in care in some form until the age of twenty one. The Committee also strongly emphasised the need to improve independent consultation with looked after children concerning their care. The consultation with looked after young people conducted for this small scale study, as well as the resulting findings, fully endorse all of these recommendations, as well as highlighting areas in which current policy and practice could be revisited and further developed.

Areas for further research related to looked after children and care leavers

Findings from the study highlight a number of specific areas in which further research would be beneficial. The nature and importance of sibling attachments raised by young people could be further investigated in terms of the caring relationships which exist between siblings while they are looked after, and the implications of the continuation of such relationships for support after leaving care. The significance of relationships with other related children such as nieces and nephews for looked after young people could also be explored further. In terms of looked after young people's friendships, there could be further investigation into their role in the promotion of well-being, and in particular the potential of friendships for enabling young people to access membership of families outside the care system. In acknowledging the need for young people to have stability within peer relationships in order to form supportive friendships, research on the benefits of long term placements for jointly placed, unrelated children would be beneficial.

The significant impact on young people of the loss of siblings to adoption merits further research in terms of the extent of the problem, and the longer term effects on their well-being. Related to this, there could be specific research in terms of the rights of children and their use of advocacy in relation to siblings within the adoption process. The worrying evidence which emerged from the accounts of young people regarding the threats to their well-being from negative peer and sibling relationships after leaving care is a further area which would benefit from research.

Two areas for research involving adults can also be identified. In view of the findings concerning the role of foster carers in promoting sibling relationships for those in care, further research related to the extent to which this is happening could be helpful. Also in view of young people's perspectives on the role of adoptive parents in severing their sibling relationships, further research is needed in the area to improve knowledge of the extent to which contact between siblings is happening post adoption.

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Finally, the findings of the thesis underline the critical importance of gaining young people's participation and direction within the research process when conducting research which affects their lives. Within this study, the use of a participatory approach has been a fundamental principle which underpinned the research process, ensuring that it remained relevant to looked after young people's views on the significance of their sibling and peer relationships. This was done in order to generate findings which were of direct relevance to practice policy and research with looked after children.

Conclusion

This thesis has been carried out within a conceptual and methodological framework which synthesised a sociological understanding of children's relationships with post structural and feminist insights, in order to privilege the views of a marginalised group of children, those who are looked after, on the meaning and the significance of their sibling and peer relationships.

The study resulted in significant new findings with implications for practice, policy and research in the following areas: the importance of sibling and peer relationships for the maintenance of looked after children's identity and well-being both during and after leaving care, the traumatic nature of the loss of such relationships, and the demands placed on looked-after children and care leavers to negotiate such relationships in the interests of their emotional and physical well-being.

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Appendix 1

Access letter, page 1

SWELL
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THE UNIVERSITY OF
WARWICK

2 July 2004

Edward Thomas
Head of Children's Services
Lacton Social Services
Redbridge Street
Lacton, LA6 7ON

Dear Mr Thomas,

Research with young people

I am approaching you in your capacity as Head of Children's
Services, to inform you about some research which I hope to
conduct with the co-operation of Lacton Social Services, and to
gain your consent.

My background
I am a qualified and experienced Children and Families social
worker, and was until September 2003 working in Lacton's
Redbridge area office. My background with looked after children
has made me aware of the importance of their relationships with
friends and family both in the short and longer term, and of the
difficulties they can experience in maintaining important
relationships after entering the care system. The lack of
knowledge in this area led to my decision to conduct my own
practitioner research study. Having worked in Lacton, I would
like to contribute to the work of other practitioners in the city by
conducting this research locally.

I am currently enrolled as a PhD student in the School of Health
and Social Studies at Warwick University, and the specific
subject of my research is *the importance of sibling and peer
relationships for children looked after by local authorities.*

The study
For this study I intend to talk individually to a small group of
children and young people currently looked after. They would be
drawn from the case loads of teams within the city who are
dealing with decisions about placements and contact on a daily
basis. The study will be child centered, its major aim being the
development of new knowledge about the relationships of looked
after children. It will provide valuable information which will be of
use to those working with children and young people, and those
engaged in policy making.

Information and findings gained from these interviews would be
disseminated to voluntary and statutory agencies across the city.
Presentations would be made to the area teams within which the
research was conducted, and would be open to social workers
city wide. The role of children and young people in presenting
the findings would be encouraged.

*I like my foster carers and
their family very much,
but I love my family, my
Gran, Mum, brothers and
sisters* (young person –
Who Cares? Trust survey
1998)

*I am very angry
sometimes because
when I move I always
leave my friends* (young
person – Who Cares?
Trust survey 1998)

*I would say never split up
the children who come
into care. I think they get
on more in life if they
have each other…as long
as they have each other*
(young black woman
aged 13 – "lost parents"
research 1997)

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Rationale

Social workers are often faced with difficult decisions concerning placements and continuation of relationships. The relationships between children and adults have received considerable attention in research and practice areas, thereby generating a knowledge base on which to draw when making complex decisions. However, little is known about the significance of children's relationships with other children, whether before, during or after a care episode. Children in local authority care whose family connections are disrupted, may attach greater significance to relationships with peers and siblings than children in the wider population. Maintaining such relationships may contribute to placement stability, enhancing support networks and improving outcomes in terms of resilience, health and well-being. We know (as highlighted by specific Department of Health publications) that relationships are easily lost on entering local authority care. Having a more detailed picture of relationships and their significance will help social workers in their practice with looked after children.

This study will directly seek children's views in order to feed them into the policy making process. In doing so it will reflect the aims of the Quality Protects programme which has emphasised the active involvement of children in expressing individual voices and thereby contributing to the planning, delivery and review of services (Objective 8).

Addressing concerns

As a social work practitioner during the past few years, I am aware of the acute difficulties faced by some local authorities, and of the effort being made by all staff to promote best practice. The aim of this study is to offer practice recommendations and increased understanding in a vital area of social work practice.

I am extremely aware of the care and sensitivity needed when involving children and young people in research, particularly those whose lives have been difficult. With this in mind, appropriate consents will need to be sought, and care will need to be taken in the selection of participants. Careful attention will be paid to the needs and interests of children throughout the study, including the maintenance of anonymity and confidentiality. As the researcher I will abide by an agreed child protection protocol and ensure that the child's social worker is informed of any serious concerns. The study will be subject to stringent ethical approval by the university, and must meet strict ethical standards in order to proceed. I will provide evidence of my status as a student researcher, and of an enhanced disclosure from the Criminal Records Bureau.

When I came into care there was me and my two brothers and my little sister…She was only about six months old the last time I saw her (young white women aged 17 – "lost parents" research 1997)

I would try to make sure every child could see their family as much as they would like to (young person – Who Cares? Trust survey 1998)

After I came into care I didn't see my brothers. So I asked to see my brothers and I saw them…I've worried about them a lot, you know (young white man aged 15 – "lost parents" research 1997)

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Benefits
Presentations of existing research will be offered to participating teams, followed by presentation of the study's findings to practitioners throughout Lacton. As a practitioner researcher, I am committed to ensuring that my research actively contributes to the work of participating social work teams. Children and young people's participation will be prioritised throughout the study, in accordance with local authority policies on service user involvement. Findings will also be disseminated via the Making Research Count forum. It is anticipated that the findings will benefit practitioners by grounding decision making in new research.

I would like to commence this study later on this year, provided I have your consent to proceed. I look forward to hearing from you at your convenience. If there is someone other than yourself whom I should approach regarding the study, perhaps you would be kind enough to ask your secretary to advise me of them? In the meantime, I hope it will be acceptable for me to approach your secretary in a fortnights' time to see how my enquiry is progressing. If you want to contact me directly please do so via the Research Secretary, Ann Brown, on (024) 7657 4136 or via e-mail: Eleanor.Parker@warwick.ac.uk.

Yours sincerely

Eleanor Parker
PhD student
Centre for the Study of Safety and Well-being (SWELL)
School of Health and Social Studies

I am happy to endorse Eleanor Parker's approach to you. Eleanor has reached the end of her first year of registration as a PhD student. She has successfully completed her research training and attained very high standards throughout. Her research proposal is well thought out, in theoretical, ethical and practice terms, and the School has given strong support to an application for external funding from the Economic and Social Research Council.

Christine Harrison
PhD Supervisor and Senior Lecturer

I think basically it's important because they're my sisters…even though they are my sisters, I feel more of a mother to them…because I have been a mother to them (young white woman aged 18 – "lost parents" research 1997)

Appendix 2

First focus group plan, page 1

Focus Group Plan

Content	Aim
Introductions CHECK ALL OK WITH TAPE Eleanor to introduce self Group members to say name and possibly one thing about self SWITCH TAPE ON **Brief introduction/reminder about project**	Ensure group are put at ease Re-check that everyone read and understood leaflet and knows why they are here
Brief discussion re use of tape recorder, limits of confidentiality, ground rules (ie letting each other speak), use of material from the group. Group to **sign agreement** to indicate they have understood research conditions. Reminder that the discussion will not be about their own experience, but will draw on general experience.	Ensure group members understand how group will operate, and what group may discuss. Ensure all understand how material may be used and are in agreement with this.
Outline rough plan of session including break mid way through, and finish time.	Ensure group understands structure and aims of session.
Ice breaker – Pooling ideas. Large sheet with child at the top. Cards provided with family listed ie mum, dad, aunt uncle, sister, half sister, step sister, cousin, friend and carers ie sw, f'carer, residential worker. Group asked to take all the cards and place in relation to child according to importance. **Add cards** to the top ranked people to define r'ship. Ie looks after, stands up for, share things with, is like me, part of my family CHECK TAPE	Get members thinking about the subject and talking with each other. Activity to focus on to kick start session and stimulate discussion. Obtain broad overview of who they perceive to be important May establish conflicting opinions and therefore areas to be explored in individ discussions?
General discussion – who is important for children in care system. Do they think this has happened to other children? Do y.p. always want someone there? Are r'ships important even when you argue? R'ships are important except when... If you had a problem, who would you go to? If something good happened, who would you tell? Is this the same for other y.p. Is there a difference between people you see and people you don't see? TAKE PHOTO Break	Begins to answer questions about the degree of importance/how r'ships are conceptualised?

SWITCH TAPE ON
Circle discussion

Started off by two vignettes, with opposing quotes. (different experiences)
Check questions as a guide to cover discussion topics.
Is this familiar?
Do you think this happens to many young people?
Which quote do you think is most true of y.p experience.
What might y p concerned do?

To initiate discussion about the research questions and their relevance. To promote discussion of the whole subject area and get their opinions.
To build on earlier discussion to inform and alter my own questions.

CHECK TAPE
Being consultants
What is research?
What does it mean to be a consultant?
Is it what they thought, should it be different?
Why is it important?
The importance of being involved.

To engage in discussion about the nature of their role, and maximise/develop their understanding and therefore their involvement. To build up enthusiasm and commitment to the second stage. To go beyond token involvement

Discuss next session
Aims, methods, timescale, what would they like it to include
Agreed means of contacting them

Looking forward and planning the next session.

Any questions
Thank you's

De brief – nature of topics discussed, may have raised issues not thought about for a long time etc
My availability by phone

To ensure that group members have the means to access support should they need it following the meeting.

Give out contact list of other agencies

Confidential observations (in sealed box)

Provide opportunity for any comments either related to the topic, or the group meeting, which group members do not wish to share.

Payment (inc name address and signature) RECEIPTS

Hand out leaflets re individual discussions to any who are interested.
Agree follow-up by phone next week.
(Include leaflet to go to friend of R and J).

Appendix 3

Research information and agreement leaflet (blue), outside

together in / yet / apart

RU OK?

A research project about the importance of brothers, sisters and friends for children and young people in care

Anyone who takes part in the project will be given £20

Research Agreement

I have read the leaflet about the project, and I understand everything Eleanor has told me

☐ I would like to take part

☐ I would not like to take part

The best day for us to meet would be

_____

The best place for us to meet would be

_____

☐ I would like to be sent a report about what the project finds out

☐ I would not like to be sent a report about what the project finds out

☐ I would like to help you tell other people about what the project finds out

☐ I would not like to help you tell other people about what the project finds out

I understand that I can change my mind about taking part whenever I want

Signed (child/young person)

_____

Signed (Researcher)

_____

Do I get anything for taking part?

You will be given £20.00 as a thank you for taking part. Being part of the project is your chance to tell adults about what really matters to you, and help other children who come into care in the future.

Who else is taking part in the project?

Other children and young people in care.

What happens after the research discussion?

If you have more to say I can come and see you again. If you want to talk to someone else about things that have happened to you, I can give you the phone numbers of people who give advice to children and young people. After I have finished the project, I will send you a report about what I have found out.

What happens now?

If you want to take part, you can call or text me on **01926 411 118**, or you can email me on **eleanor.parker@warwick.ac.uk**.

Leave me your name and telephone number, and I will call you back as soon as I can. If I don't hear from you I will ring in a few days to find out if you want to take part.

Eleanor Parker
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School of Health and Social Studies
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Coventry
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Fax: 0247652 4415
Email: eleanor.parker@warwick.ac.uk

THE UNIVERSITY OF
WARWICK

Research information and agreement leaflet (blue), inside

My name is Eleanor Parker

I am a researcher at Warwick University, in Coventry. I am doing this project because I used to work with children in care, and I want to find out more about who is important to them.

Some questions you might have!

What is research anyway?

Research is a way of finding out new things. It is done by asking people about what has happened to them, or about what they think. The information is used to help other adults and children.

What is this research project about?

It is about the views of children and young people who are or have been in care. I want to find out more about how important brothers, sisters and friends are when you are in care, even when you don't see or live with them.

Why do you want to know?

I know that it can be important when you are in care to keep in touch with adults, like your mum or dad or maybe your nan or aunty. Nobody knows much about how important it is to keep in touch with other children like brothers, sisters and friends.

Why do you want to talk to me?

Most projects like this have only asked adults what they think. We need to know more about what children think.

What will you do with what I tell you?

I will use it to help other children who come into care. I will write a report about what I have found out, and meet with adults like social workers to tell them what children like you have said.

What if I don't want people to know what I have said?

That's ok – if I write about what you think I **won't use your name** so no-one will know it is about you. I won't tell your carer or social worker what you have said unless you ask me to.

So you won't tell anyone else what I have told you?

No, not unless you tell me that you or another child is being hurt. Then I might need to tell someone, but I would try to talk to you about it first.

What happens if I want to take part?

I will come and meet you first. You can ask me about anything you don't understand. Then if you still want to take part, we will agree when and where to meet for the research discussion.

What if I change my mind?

That's ok: you can change your mind at any time, even after we have started the discussion. It's up to you.

When and where will it be?

At a time and place that you choose. This could be where you live.

What will happen in the discussion?

I might start off by asking you a question, and then we can talk about whatever you want. We can write or draw if you don't like talking. We can stop at any time, and you don't have to talk about anything you don't want to. I want to know what you really think – the good and the bad things about being in care. There are no right or wrong answers!

How will you remember everything I tell you?

If it's ok with you, I will use a tape recorder, so I don't have to write down everything you say. The tape will only be used for the discussion, and no-one else will listen to it. The tape will be destroyed after the project is finished.

How long will the discussion take?

About an hour, or longer if you want.

Are you aged between 10 and 17?

Have you been in care for more than eighteen months, either now or in the past?

Do you have brothers, sisters or friends in care or living somewhere else?

Do you think relationships with brothers, sisters and friends are important when you are in care?

Do you want to take part in a research project?

Appendix 4

Research information and agreement leaflet (red), outside

together if yet apart

RU OK?

A research project about the importance of brothers, sisters and friends for children and young people in care

Anyone who takes part in the project will receive £20

Research Agreement

I have read the leaflet about the project, and I understand everything Eleanor has told me

☐ I would like to take part

☐ I would not like to take part

The best day for us to meet would be

_____

The best place for us to meet would be

_____

☐ I would like to be sent a report about what the project finds out

☐ I would not like to be sent a report about what the project finds out

☐ I would like to help you tell other people about what the project finds out

☐ I would not like to help you tell other people about what the project finds out

I understand that I can change my mind about taking part whenever I want

Signed (young person)

_____

Signed (Researcher)

_____

Who else is taking part in the project?

Other children and young people who are, or have been in care.

What happens after the research discussion?

If you have more to say I can come and see you again. If you want to talk to someone else about your experiences, I can give you the phone numbers of people who give advice to young people. After I have finished the project, I will send you a report about what I have found out.

What happens now?

If you want to take part, you can call or text me on **01926 411 118**, or you can email me on **eleanor.parker@warwick.ac.uk**.

Leave me your name and telephone number, and I will call you back as soon as possible. If I don't hear from you I will ring in a few days to find out if you want to take part.

Eleanor Parker
Researcher
School of Health and Social Studies
University of Warwick
Coventry
CV4 7AL

Tel: 01926 411 118
Fax: 02476 52 4415
Email: eleanor.parker@warwick.ac.uk

THE UNIVERSITY OF
WARWICK

Are you aged between 10 and 17?

Have you been in care for more than eighteen months, either now or in the past?

Do you have brothers, sisters or friends in care or living somewhere else?

Do you think relationships with brothers, sisters and friends are important when you are in care?

Do you want to take part in a research project?

My name is Eleanor Parker

I am a researcher at Warwick University, in Coventry. I am doing this project because I used to work with young people in care, and I want to find out more about who is important to them.

Some questions you might have!

What is research anyway?

Research is a way of finding out new information. It usually involves asking people about their opinions or their experience. The information is used to help provide better services for different groups of people, children and adults.

What is this research project about?

It is about the views of children and young people who are or have been in care. The aim is to find out how important brothers sisters and friends are when you are in care, even when you don't see or live with them.

Why do you want to know?

I know that it can be important when you are in care to keep in touch with adults, like parents or other relatives. Nobody knows much about how important it is to keep in touch with other young people.

Why talk to me?

Most research projects have only asked adults what they think. I want to find out what young people think.

What will you do with what I tell you?

I will use it to help plan better services for young people in care, and to tell adults such as social workers about who is important to young people.

What if I don't want people to know what I have said?

That's ok - if I write about what you think I won't use your name so no-one will know it is about you. I won't tell your carer or social worker what you have said unless you ask me to.

So you won't tell anyone else what I have told you?

No, not unless you tell me that you or another young person is being hurt. Then I might need to tell someone, but I would try and talk to you about it first.

What happens if I want to take part?

I will come and see you and answer any other questions you have. Then if you still want to take part, we will agree when and where to meet for the research discussion.

What if I change my mind?

That's ok; you can change your mind at any time, even after we have started the discussion. It's your decision.

When and where will it be?

At a time and place that suits you. This could be where you live.

What will happen in the discussion?

I might start off by asking you a question, and then we can talk about whatever you want. You can stop the discussion at any point, and you don't have to talk about anything you don't want to. I want to know what you really think – the good and the bad things about being in care. There are no right or wrong answers!

How will you remember everything I tell you?

If it's ok with you, I will tape record the discussion, so I don't have to make notes. The tape will only be used for the discussion, and won't be given to anyone else. It will be destroyed after I have finished the project.

How long will the discussion take?

About an hour, or longer if you want.

What's in it for me?

You will be given £20 as a thank you for taking part. Taking part in the project is also your chance to tell adults about what really matters to you. What you tell me will help other young people who come into care.

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Appendix 5

Participant profiles

1. <u>Jade</u>   One of three siblings, she entered care with her two brothers after the breakup of her parents' marriage. Her father was unable to cope with them and asked her current foster carer, whom he knew, to look after them. The three siblings remained with this carer until adulthood. At the time of interview, Jade and her younger brother remained in foster care, whilst their older brother had moved out. Jade had also developed a close relationship with Nicky, fostered more recently with the same carer. The two girls described their relationship as being like sisters and their closeness was evident during the interview.

2. <u>Nicky</u>   One of four siblings, she was the only one of them to enter care, following a breakdown in her relationship with her mother. This had prevented her from seeing her younger brothers for some time. Nicky was particularly upset by this as she had been close to them and had cared for her youngest brother as a baby. She had renewed contact with him at the time of interview and took a keen interest in his welfare. She had less contact with her older brothers whom she described as drinking a lot. She was close to Jade and her brothers, viewing them as foster siblings. At the time of interview Nicky was due to move to a flat and was worried about how she would cope on her own. She had hoped to be able to live with Jade, however the local authority had not thought this to be a good idea.

3. <u>David</u>   One of seven siblings, he was separated from five siblings on entering care, although he was living with his brother Shaun at the time of interview. One of his brothers was living in a placement out of the local area, and contact was limited. David's youngest four siblings had been living at home with his parents; however they had been taken into care and subsequently adopted with no plans for contact. David was extremely angry about this loss of contact. David had previously been placed out of the local authority area and had lost contact with friends since moving back.

4. <u>Shaun</u>   David's brother and one of seven siblings, he was in the same situation with regard to separation from and loss of his siblings. Both Shaun and David talked with passion and anger about their siblings having been taken from them, blaming both social workers and adoptive parents for, as they saw it, 'stealing' their brothers and sisters. Shaun had previously been placed out of the local authority area and had lost contact with friends since moving back.

5. <u>Reece</u>   One of eleven siblings, he was the only one to come into care. He had regular contact with all of his siblings and took great pride in talking about this, and about their lives and achievements. Reece had one sister who was going to be adopted, however in his account he talked about his family protesting in court, which he saw as having influenced a reversal of the adoption plan. Reece also had some good friends with whom he had previously lived in residential care, however he emphasised that these were people he had known prior to entering care. His account also emphasised the temporary nature of many peer relationships he had had while in residential care.

6. <u>Johnny</u>   One of four siblings, he had entered care, and then returned home briefly, with all his siblings. Following another brief joint placement, his two brothers moved on to other placements while he had remained with his sister with the same carer. His sister subsequently moved on to independent living. Johnny had no contact with his eldest brother, and limited contact with his brother Stuart, whom he saw if they both visited their mother at the same time. Johnny saw his sister regularly and spoke fondly about her.

7. <u>Hayley</u>   One of five siblings, she entered care with her young baby, living initially with foster carers. Her younger brother and sister entered care separately and lived in several different placements. Her eldest brother was already living independently. Hayley also had a half-sister whom she had never met, although she had tried to find

out about her. She moved to live independently with her son, however problems related to her brother using her flat, and violence from her boyfriend, led to her eviction. At the time of interview she had recently secured a flat with her son, who was eighteen months old. Her sister remained in foster care, and Hayley hoped she could come and live with her as she was lonely, although she thought the local authority would not allow this. Hayley's brother had been in bed and breakfast accommodation, and was now living with friends. Hayley had a complicated relationship with her boyfriend, and was having to cope with the results of violence which had erupted between her boyfriend and her family following an argument. Hayley had one supportive friend who was also a young single mother.

8. <u>Kelly</u>   One of five siblings, she came into care with two siblings, following the death of her brother. She did not get on well with the foster carer and consequently moved through several placements before she reached her current one. At the time of interview Kelly was placed out of the local authority area and had little contact with her siblings. She enjoyed seeing her younger brother Tom on special occasions. Kelly's other brother was placed at residential school, and she had limited contact with him. Although she had asked to see him, the school had told her foster carer that this would be disruptive for him. Her relationship with her older sister was more fraught, as Kelly felt the need to talk about the reasons why she had come into care, whereas her sister did not want this disclosed. Kelly also struggled with this issue in her other relationships with friends at school.

9. <u>Debbie</u>   One of ten siblings, she entered care alone following initial physical and sexual abuse in her birth family, and subsequent physical abuse while privately fostered by a distant relative. Debbie had several placements while in care, and at the time of interview had left care and was living in a house on her own. She had little contact with young people of her own ethnicity, and felt that her cultural needs had not been met or understood while in care. Debbie struggled to completely acknowledge her ethnicity

because of its connections to her abusive family background. Debbie was an extremely isolated young person with no family support, who was struggling to attend college and study. Her main source of support was from the family of three friends who were sisters (of White ethnicity), where she felt accepted to an extent as a family member and received both practical and emotional support. Debbie was also attempting to maintain a relationship with her boyfriend, however her feelings about her past often affected this.

10. <u>Shelley</u>   One of five siblings, she came into care alone, and was placed with her grandmother. Therefore she did not see herself as being in care. She had recently been joined by her brother who had previously struggled in foster placements, and was pleased that he was living with her. Shelley had regular contact with her younger siblings who continued to live with her mother. Shelley had some friends from when she had lived at home, but having moved to her grandmother's she saw them less as she was further away.

11. <u>Stuart</u>   One of four siblings, he came into care and then returned home briefly with all of them. Following another short joint placement, he and one brother moved on to other placements together. At the time of interview he was living in foster care while his older brother had left the placement to live independently. Stuart also shared his placement with a number of other fostered young people, however he emphasised the temporary nature of these relationships, as the young people frequently moved on. He identified a close friend outside the care system, and felt that he was accepted to an extent as a family member, spending a lot of his free time with them. He expected they might help to support him after leaving care.

12. <u>Rebecca</u>   One of two siblings, she came into care with her only sister, whom she had had some caring responsibility for as a baby. They remained together for several years, until Rebecca as a teenager began to rebel, as she saw it, and ended up leaving their joint placement. After some time spent in residential care, where she met her current partner, she moved to live in a flat with him and at the time of interview was

expecting her first child. She remained close to her sister, which she saw as being due to their close relationship from a young age, and was supportive and caring towards her. She also maintained a close relationship with her sister's foster carers.

13. <u>Tom</u>   One of five siblings, he came into care with two siblings, following the death of his brother. He subsequently experienced loss of contact first with his middle sister Kelly, who moved from the foster placement, and then with his older sister and her baby, who moved to live independently. He had little contact with either sister at the time of interview. Tom's brother returned from residential care to the same foster placement for occasional weekends. Tom seemed to have made good friendships locally to his foster placement, and also got on well with the foster carers son and grandson.

14. <u>Daniel</u>   One of nine siblings, he initially came into care on his own. He then returned home briefly, before being placed with one of his brothers. The placement subsequently broke down for him, and the brothers were separated. At the time of interview Daniel had been placed on his own out of the local authority area for two and a half years. Daniel's father was Asian, and his mother White European, however Daniel chose to identify himself as White European, stating that he preferred to pass for being of White ethnicity. He had also shortened his name to make it sound less Asian. He had some contact with some of his siblings when he returned to the local authority area to visit his family. Two of Daniel's siblings, one of whom he had helped to look after, had been adopted with no contact. Daniel felt that his siblings should not have been adopted, and that once they had been, there should have been some contact so that they could come back and be a brother when they were older. Daniel had made some friends in his local area, the one he was closest to had lived in the same placement as him for some time, which had been a key factor in his feeling able to invest in the friendship.

15. <u>Andrew</u>   One of seven siblings, he came into foster care with his sister Sophie, and then had several placements on his own as well as periods of time back at home, before he and Sophie were placed together again at their own request. Two of his older siblings remained with their birth father. At the time of interview he had been living with Sophie for five years. One of Andrew's siblings, born after he entered care, had been adopted. There was limited contact in the form of letters and photos, although Andrew wanted to see his sister as well. Andrew had lost contact with friends through moving placements and schools. He was looking forward to his foster carer adopting a young child.

16. <u>Sophie</u>   One of seven siblings, she came into foster care with her brother Andrew, and then had several placements on her own as well as periods of time back at home before she and Andrew were placed together again at their own request. At the time of interview, she was living with Andrew, and talked about standing up for him at school, as well as her intention to help him after they left care. Sophie had some memories of children she had lived with in previous foster placements and had lost contact with. She had also lost contact with friends through moving placements and schools. Sophie wanted to have more contact with her adopted sister; however she believed that her sister's adoptive parents did not want her to have contact. She planned to make contact when they were both older. Sophie, like Andrew, was excited that her foster carer was planning to adopt a child.

17. <u>Mark</u>   One of nine siblings, he was initially placed with one of his brothers, and subsequently lived in several different placements on his own before being placed with his sister Kerry. One of his other sisters also lived with them for a while, but was subsequently moved. At the time of interview Mark had been living with Kerry for seven years. Mark travelled some distance to his school, and was frustrated that he was not allowed contact with his friends outside of school hours. Mark had sporadic contact with some of his siblings, and no contact with two of them, who had been adopted.

18. <u>Kerry</u>   One of nine siblings, she was initially placed with one of her sisters, and remained with her through several placements, until the final placement disrupted for her sister. At the time of interview she had been living with her brother Mark for seven years. Kerry saw herself as having many friends at school, and thought it was important not to look lonely, by being part of a big group. Kerry also had sporadic contact with several siblings, and no contact with the two who had been adopted. She explained that the social worker would not let them have contact, and believed that this would not change in the future because she would not know where her siblings were.

Appendix 6

Interview topic schedule, page 1

Research Discussion

Welcome,Reminder of project, **stop** interview or **take a break** at any point.
Start tape recorder
Explain that this is a research meeting between ...., and............ on (date)
..............at (Time), for the Together Yet Apart research project, to talk about how
important (relationships with) other children/yp are when you are in care.

Introduction
Ask child's age , how long they have been in care, where they live now and who with.
(what they like doing when they are not at school/college). (what is their favourite food)
(questions if they are not at ease)

I would like to find out about your experiences of being in care...so if we think about other
children, (that might be brothers or sisters or other children you know), I would like to know
more about who you have lived with, who you see, who you don't see, and how you feel
about those other children.

Activity – spider diagram
Centre – yp
First circle – live with
Second circle – have contact with
Third circle – don't have contact with/lost contact with

Here and now
Shall we start by talking about your life now. If you could tell me a bit about about who you
live with, and who you spend your time with. I'd also like to know about any children or
young people you don't live with, and whether you have contact with them..........

- Tell me about who you live with now
- How do you feel about living with them?
- Do you still see _____ now?
- Who decides when and where you see them?
- What sort of things do you do together
- Are things between you and _____ the same as when you first came into care, or are they worse or better?
- Is there anything/anyone that could help make things better?

Coming into care
Using road map,
- Who did you come into care with?
- What happened to your brothers/sisters
- Do you know who decided what would happen, and why?
- Why did you go there?
- What did you think about what happened?
- Why did _____ go somewhere else/stay at home?
- What did you think/feel about that?
- Did you see /speak to them after that?
- What sort of things did you do with them?

About friends

- Do you still see or speak to friends you had before you came into care?
- Have you made new friends since being in care?

Leaving care

- Who do you think you will live with after you leave care?
- Who do you think you will see or visit after you leave care?
- What sort of things do you think you will do with them?
- Can you think of anything that would help you do that?
- Do you think adults could help you keep in touch? How?

General questions

- If you could change anything about being in care, what would it be and why?
- Have things turned out the way you wanted, or not?
- Do you think other people could or should have acted differently when making decisions about your life? Why?
- Who has been the most important person/people while you have been in care?
- Who will be the most important person/people when you leave care?

Extra Ideas to use

a) Statements to agree or disagree with

Brothers and sisters should not be split up when they come into care
Children should be allowed to see their brothers and sisters when they are in care
Children should be allowed to see their friends when they are in care
When you are in care you are allowed to see your brothers and sisters
Brothers and sisters (are important because they) stand up for each other
Brothers and sisters share the same experiences
Friends share the same experiences
Or
b) completing sentences such as

Brothers/sisters are important because................
Friends are important because........................
Finishing off
It's almost time for us to finish our conversation.
Is there anything else you want to talk about that we haven't talked about so far?
Summarise themes of discussion
Reflect back difficult times, strengths.
Is there anything you have told me that you don't want to be included in the written report?
Is there anything you want to ask me?
Return to normal life and today

Turn off tape recorder
Thanks
Payment
Contact leaflet and follow up information

Appendix 7

Follow-up and support leaflet (green), front and back

together yet apart

Need help or advice? Not sure who to ask? Here are some organisations which could be useful.

Mind, Body, Soul
Information about health and well-being
www.mindbodysoul.gov.uk

National Self-Harm Network
Support for anyone who self harms (and free information packs)
www.nshn.co.uk

A National Voice
An organisation run by and for care experienced young people
www.anationalvoice.org/

The Who Cares? Trust
Information and support for children and young people in care
www.thewhocarestrust.org.uk

Voice for the Child in Care
Information about your rights, benefits, and help with education and employment
020 7833 5792
www.vcc-uk.org

Cafcass
Information about the law relating to young people in care, and useful links
www.cafcass.co.uk

Young Minds
Help and advice on mental health issues
www.youngminds.org.uk

'Road for you'
Help and advice when someone you know has died
0808 808 1677
Mon-Fri 9.30am – 5.00pm
www.rd4u.org.uk

ChildLine
Free 24 hour help-line for children and young people
0800 1111
www.childline.org.uk

There 4 Me
Counselling and support for young people aged 12 – 16
www.there4me.com

together yet apart

Thank you for taking part in this research project! All the information from the project will be used to help children and young people who come into care in the future.

After the project is finished, I will send you a report about what I have found out.

If you think of anything else you want to tell or ask me, you can call me on the telephone number below. If I don't answer, leave your name and phone number and I will call you back as soon as I can.

Talking or thinking about what has happened in your life can sometimes be difficult. You might want to talk to someone else about your feelings. As well as your carer or social worker, you can get help and advice from other people. Some of them are listed on the back of this leaflet.

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