

Care and prejudice

A report of children's experience
by the Children's Rights Director for England

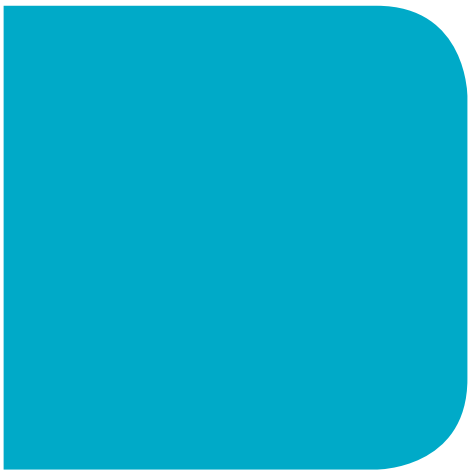


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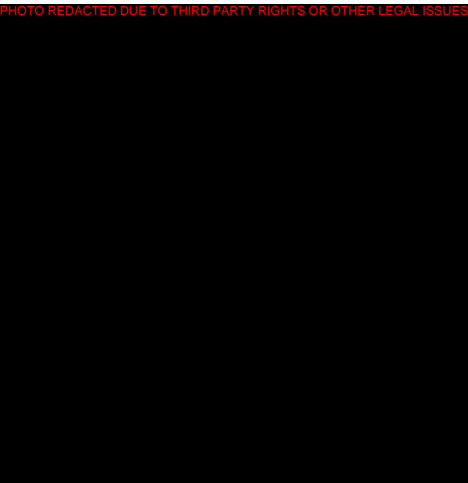


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Introduction



The law sets out my duties as Children's Rights Director for England. With my team, one of my main duties is to ask children and young people for their views about how both children and young people are looked after in England. My duties cover children and young people living away from home in all types of boarding schools, residential special schools or further education colleges, children and young people living in children's homes, in family centres, in foster care or who have been placed for adoption, and care leavers and children or young people getting any sort of help from council social care services.

As well as asking young people for their views and publishing what they tell us, with my team I also give advice on children's and young people's views and on children's rights and welfare to Her Majesty's Chief Inspector at Ofsted, and to the Government. I have a duty to raise any issues I think are important about the rights and welfare of children or young people living away from home or getting children's social care support. With my team, I do this both for individual young people and for whole groups of young people.

Children and young people in care, and care leavers, have often told us that people sometimes discriminate against people in care, and can have a prejudice against people who are or were in care. Sometimes this is called 'careism'. For this report, we asked children and young people in care about this, and whether it was something they had experienced themselves.

We try to write all our reports so that they can easily be read by children and young people, and by government ministers. Like all my reports, this report is being published for everyone to read. You can find copies of all my reports on our website: www.rights4me.org.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Roger Morgan'.

Roger Morgan

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Summary

This report is based on a survey of 316 children and discussions with a further 46 children. Children in our survey saw the best things about being in care as meeting new people, having good staff or carers who look after them well, activities that being in care means they can do, and having their own possessions. Foster children were most likely to say that good carers were the best thing, and those who had been in care longer were most likely to say that meeting new people was the best thing. Being in care can mean being away from dangers at home. It can also mean having more activities and opportunities, and sometimes better education, than children not in care. Being in care could mean feeling more closely supervised and needing more permissions for things than other children.

Children saw the worst thing about being in care as missing their family. Missing their family got less the longer children spent in care and away from their families. Disabled children particularly missed being with brothers, sisters and friends.

The majority of children told us they had not been treated either better or worse than others for being in care. Around a third reported having at some time been treated better, and a similar proportion reported having at some time been treated worse. Girls and children in foster homes were more likely to have been treated better for being in care. Better treatment usually involved being helped and supported more than other children. Being bullied by other children for being in care was the most usual way of being treated worse. The longer children spent in care, the more likely they were to report sometimes being treated worse, rather than better, for being in care.

Being in care can make a difference to how other children, teachers and other professionals react to a child or young person. Sometimes this is bad, sometimes good, but other people often have fixed views about children in care, and these are often not good ones. A group of children we asked about educational chances reported that overall, children in care still get much the same educational chances as other children.

Half the children said that being in care made them feel different from other children. More girls felt different, and young people felt more different the longer they were in care. The main reasons for feeling different were living away from their family, and having some very different life experiences to other children.

Just under a third of children said there was nothing that coming into care had stopped them from doing. For around a quarter, it had stopped them seeing their family regularly; over a quarter said it had stopped them spending so much time with friends. For some, coming into care had stopped problem and risky behaviour. Forty-four per cent of children (especially girls and children in children's homes rather than foster homes) were not allowed to stay overnight with friends, usually because their friends' parents hadn't been police checked.

Overall, children in care (but especially girls, children in children's homes, those who had spent longest in care and disabled children) believed that the general public has a negative view of children in care. Almost half the children thought the public saw children in care as bad and uncontrollable; one in eight that the public felt sorry for them. Only one in 10 believed that the public thought children in care are the same as other children, and just under one in 12 that the public saw children in care positively.

Forty-five per cent of children worried about other people knowing they come from care, mainly because they would be judged, treated differently or bullied. Many had experienced teachers treating them differently when they knew they were from care – sometimes better, sometimes worse. They were most worried about possible employers, other children and young people, and possible future landlords knowing. Views differed on whether knowing someone was from care would be a problem in getting a job or accommodation in the future; some thought it would be a problem, others that they had enough help to overcome this.

How we asked for views

We asked children and young people for their views in two ways. First, we invited children and young people in care to fill in a survey, using specially designed question cards. We sent invitations to take part in this survey to people in children’s homes or foster care across the country. We picked their children’s homes and fostering services at random from our national lists.

Second, we invited children and young people in care to join one or more groups to discuss or give us their views personally. Again, we chose the homes and services at random to send invitations to, and for this report we sent these around the southern part of the country. We send invitations around different parts of the country for different reports.

We met one group at the Planetarium in Winchester. This group gave us their votes on a number of questions we projected on the planetarium screen for them. We

then held five discussion groups about ‘careism’ at the Milestones Museum, Basingstoke. At each of these we asked children and young people to give us their views about a series of issues for this report. Each group was led by a member of our team, and another team member took notes of the views people gave. Only the children and young people in the group, and members of our team, were in the room, so that people could speak as freely as possible. The adults who had brought children waited in another part of the museum.

The survey and the discussion and voting groups also gave us their views for two other reports we are publishing: *Keeping in touch* (about children in care keeping in contact with parents, brothers and sisters and other family members), and *Getting advice* (about how children in care get the advice and information they need).

In many of our survey questions, we asked for people’s views without us suggesting any answers, and we analysed their answers afterwards for this report. The views in this report therefore came entirely from children themselves, and were not ideas we had suggested for people to choose from. Where we have listed children’s answers in a chart in the report, we have included all the answers that each came from at least one in 10 of the people answering that question. Where we say there is a ‘big difference’ in the answers given by different groups of children, this means that there was a difference of 10 percentage points or more between the different groups.

In this report, we have not left out any views that we might disagree with, or made our own comments on anything children or young people told us. We have not added our own views or ideas. What this report says is purely the views of children and young people.

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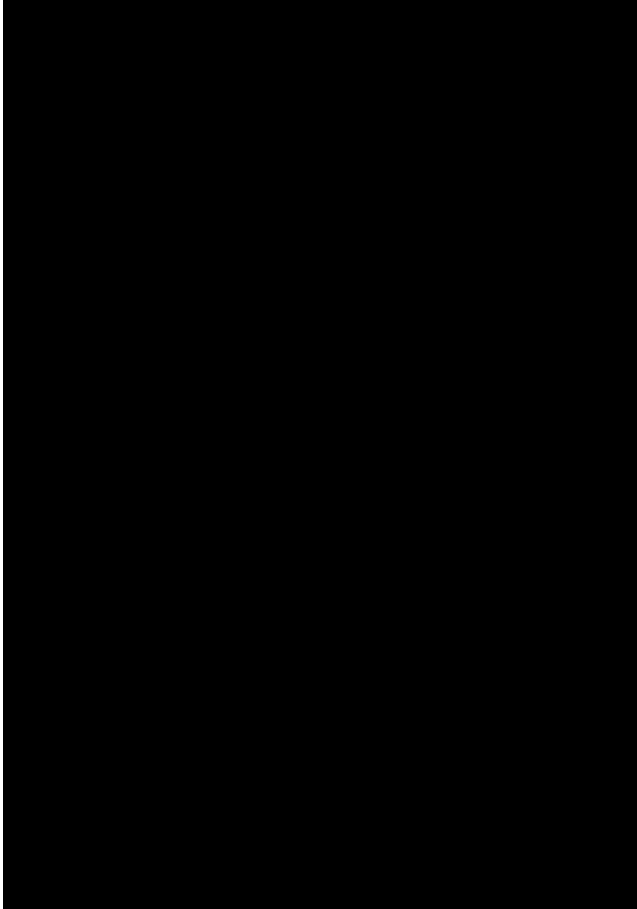


The children and young people who gave us their views

Altogether, we received survey responses from 316 children and young people. Another 46 children and young people took part in our groups about 'careism', 16 of these in the voting session in the planetarium and 30 in one or another of our five discussion groups. In total, therefore, **362 children and young people gave us their views for this report.**

Of the 311 people who told us their gender in our survey, 166 (53%) were female and 145 (47%) were male. Out of the 308 who told us about their ethnicity, 271 (88%) said they were white. Seventeen said they were from a mixed background, 14 that they were Black and three that they were Asian. Out of 316 who told us whether or not they had a disability, 42 (13%) said they did have a disability. Out of these 42, 38 told us what type of disability they had. Twelve of these said they had learning difficulties, eight that they had attention deficit hyperactivity disorder and five that they had dyslexia.

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Of the 299 people who filled in the survey and told us the sort of placement they were living in, 161 (54%) were living in children's homes and 123 (41%) were living in foster homes. Eight care leavers also filled in our survey, as did four children placed to live with their own parents, and three who lived in residential special schools. We have included all these in our results.

For each of the survey questions answered in this report, we have checked to see whether there are any big differences in the answers between boys and girls, from disabled children, and between children living in children's homes and foster children. Where there are, we have said so.

We also wanted to know whether how long children had been in care made a difference to their answers, so we checked this as well. Out of the 280 children and young people who answered a survey question about how long they had been in care, 87 (31%) had been in care for up to two years, 106 (38%) between two and six years, and another 87 (31%) for over six years.

The chart shows the details of how long the children had been in care. We had views from children who had spent a fairly short time in care, and those who had spent many years and most of their lives in care.

Figure 1: How long children had been in care

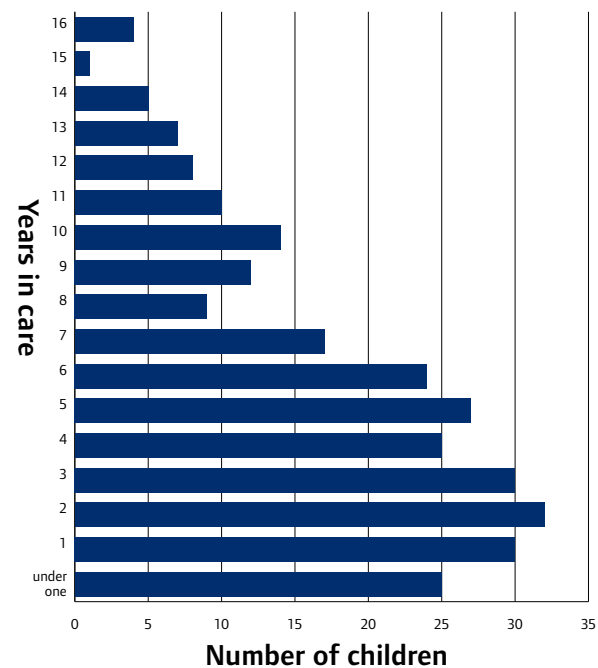


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The best things about being in care

Before asking the children about the way other people behaved towards them, we asked them what they thought about being in care.

We had answers about the best things about being in care from 285 people in our survey. Here are the most common:

- Meeting new people** (25% of children)
- Having good carers or staff** (22% of children)
- Being looked after properly** (22% of children)
- Activities (including days out and holidays)** (20% of children)
- Having material things of your own** (14% of children)
- Support** (11% of children).

From this list it is clear **that children value the people they are with in care, both the new people they meet and those who look after them, followed by the activities they are able to do in care, and having their own material things and possessions.**

There were no big differences between boys and girls in the things children said were best about care. **Children in foster care were more likely than those in children's homes to say that having good carers or staff was a best thing about being in care.** Disabled children had much the same view as everyone else about the best things about being in care. **Children who had been in care for over six years were the most likely to tell us that meeting new people was one of the best things about being in care.**

Although they came from fewer than one in 10 children, and so didn't make the list, there were some other important views. Twenty-six children said that **a good education** was a best thing about care for them and 19 children wrote about **being safe in care**. Only five children told us a best thing for them was being in care with their brothers or sisters.

In discussion groups, we heard that meeting new people was often not just making lots of friends, but also **being able to get help from your friends** with problems you might have. We also heard how care can mean a better education: 'having a better education. May not have been to school if not been in care'.

We also heard that **'support' didn't just mean help with everyday problems, but help to turn your life around;** one young person told us that if they had not been taken into care, 'I'd probably be in prison'. Support could mean things like 'help to live independent', or being 'helped to control my behaviour'. It could mean help with health problems: 'I am much healthier now'.

For some in our discussion groups, **being in care had meant getting away from danger:** 'being away from mum and dad's behaviour – having a normal life'; 'I feel happier because I am away from abuse'; 'living here I'm out of danger'; 'my dad stopped hitting us – I love my foster family'. Being in care could mean 'I get treated a thousand times better'; 'not being scared'; 'not getting beaten up' and 'I have security and love'.

One discussion group told us that **people in care can get things that other people don't.** They said that many normal families don't get the luxury of holidays, TVs, DVDs and regular pocket money. They also said that if you are in care, you do get listened to, but not everyone else gets listened to so much.

'get lots of advice and help for the future'

'looked after with lots of love and care'

The worst things about being in care

We had answers about the worst things about being in care from 276 people in our survey. Here are the most common:

Being away from your family (47% of children)

Rules (19% of children)

'Nothing' (12% of children).

From these answers, **being away from, and missing, your family was by far the most common feeling about being in care**, looking at both the best and the worst things children told us about. Twenty children told us **being away from brothers or sisters** was the worst thing about being in care for them. There is more about being with, or separated from, brothers and sisters in our report *Keeping in touch*. The **rules** that people disliked about being in care included having to get a social worker's permission for many

things, rules about going out on your own or seeing friends, and the rules that homes and schools had about everyday things like bedtimes.

There were no big differences between boys and girls, or between those in children's homes and those in foster care, on what they said were the worst things about being in care. **Disabled children were much more likely than others to say that being away from brothers and sisters, rather than other members of their family, was the worst thing about being in care.** In the survey, 34 out of the 38 children who told us they had a disability said this. **Disabled children were also more likely than others to put missing friends on their list of worst things about being in care.**

How long children had spent in care made a number of big differences to what they had experienced as the worst things about being in care. Those who had spent less than

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two years in care were most likely to say that the worst things included missing being with their family, having to move placements, and having to keep to new rules where they were placed. Young people who had spent over six years in care were least likely to say that missing being with their family was a worst thing about being in care. As one person put it, 'being in care at a young age means you know no difference – coz don't know family'. **The longer you spent in care away from your family, the less you missed them.**

Some other worst things, that came from fewer than one in 10 children, were **bullying** (this came from 25 children), **moving to different placements** (which also came from 25 children) and being away from friends (16 children said this). Fourteen children told us that the worst thing about being in care was **being seen as different**. Only eight children (3% of those who answered the question) told us that being treated badly by carers was a worst thing, and only five (2%) said that social workers were a worst thing.

One person in a discussion group said that the worst thing about being in care was simply 'getting moved around a lot'. Although moving to live in a new placement was a worst thing for 25 children in the survey, only two children in the survey told us that moving to a new school was a worst thing about being in care.

Thirty-three children (12% of all those who answered the question) wrote that there was nothing they thought was a 'worst thing' about being in care for them. For comparison, only 15 children (5% of those who answered that question) said there was nothing they thought was a 'best thing' about being in care.

Adding all the answers together from our questions about 'best things' and 'worst things', we were told about more best things than worst things. There were 445 best things, compared with 351 worst things, about being in care.

In discussion groups, we heard about the problems of being **bullied** for being in care, which could include being called names and being physically hurt: 'people can bully you about being in care'; 'get called horrible names'. We also heard that care can spoil your education: 'having to move schools in the middle of my education'. One person told us that being in care didn't always make someone do better: 'I misbehave more than I did'.

'moved about
all the time'

'my past always
comes back to me'

'school groups for
looked after children
– outcasts'

'asking permission
for EVERYTHING'

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Are children in care treated differently from others?

We asked the children filling in our survey whether they had ever been treated better, or worse, than other children or young people because they were in care. A total of 309 children answered this question. Over a third of the children **(37%) told us they had at some time been treated better than other children or young people because they were in care, and a similar proportion (34%) said they had at some time been treated worse than others because they were in care.** Children did give us examples of being treated both better and worse at different times. Out of the 309 children who answered our questions about whether they had ever been treated better, or had ever been treated worse, 195 (63%) said they had never been treated better than others for being in care, and 205 (67%) that they had never been treated worse than others because they were in care. **The majority of children in care responding to the survey did not report ever being**

treated better or worse than other children because they were in care.

Girls reported being treated better for being in care more than boys did (44% of girls, compared with 29% of boys). There was no big difference between boys and girls in saying they had been treated worse for being in care.

Children in foster care were more likely than those in children's homes to say that they had been treated better for being in care. Children in children's homes were more likely than fostered children to say they had sometimes been treated worse for being in care. Disabled children were no more likely than others to say they had been treated either better or worse for being in care.

Children who had been in care for less than two years were more likely than those who had been in care longer to say that they had been treated better for being in care. Young

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people who had spent longer in care (over six years) were more likely than those who had come into care in the past two years to say they had sometimes experienced being treated worse for being in care. Those who spent longest in care were, however, not much more likely to report having been treated better than others for being in care. **So spending more years in care was more likely to bring experiences of being treated worse, rather than of being treated better, than children and young people who weren't in care.**

Here are the main ways in which children told us they had been treated better. We have included everything that came from at least one in 10 of the children who gave us examples of being treated better, but the percentages are out of all the 309 children who answered the question about how children in care are treated:

- Being helped and supported** (11% of children)
- Being loved and cared for** (7% of children)
- Being given privileges** (7% of children)
- More help with education from teachers** (7% of children)
- Being listened to more** (5% of children)
- More trips and activities** (5% of children).

It must be remembered that only **just over a third of the children said they had been treated better because they were in care. For those children, there is therefore a mixture of different ways in which they had been treated better, including how they were looked after, supported and listened to, help at school, and privileges, trips and activities.**

Again there were differences between boys and girls in what they told us. If they had been treated better for being in

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care, boys were more likely than girls to say they had been listened to more and had more trips and activities, while girls were more likely than boys to say they had a better education because they were in care. Where they had been treated better, foster children were more likely to say they had been more loved and cared for, while those in children's homes were more likely to say they had been helped and supported more.

Here are the main ways in which children told us they had been treated worse than other children for being in care. We have included everything that came from at least one in 10 of the children who gave us examples of being treated worse, but again the percentages are out of all the 309 children who answered the question about how children in care are treated:

Being bullied (16% of children)

People making assumptions about you (7% of children)

Being treated worse at school (3% of children).

Again, we must remember that only just over a third of the children said they had been treated worse because they were in care. It is important that 16% of all children who answered this question said they had been bullied because

they were in care. **Being bullied for being in care was the biggest single way that children in care told us they had been treated worse than other children. One in six children in care in this survey had been bullied for being in care.**

Girls were more likely than boys to say they had been treated worse at school because they were in care. How many years children had been in care didn't make any big differences to the list of how children said they had been treated worse for being in care, and being bullied came top of the list for all age groups.

In discussion groups, children told us how they had been treated differently. One group said that 'people automatically think it's a bad thing if you're in care, especially your teachers at school'. We heard that **being in care can be held against you**, and used in arguments against you. One group described how in school, people can feel sorry for someone in care, but then want to find out why you are in care, and if you don't tell them you can be bullied. At school, you could be picked on for being different. One person told us they were teased because other children knew that their mother took drugs. One care leaver told us how they avoided being treated differently because they were from care: 'I don't tend to tell anyone so if they don't know they don't treat me differently. It's

**'more support
and more attention'**

**'a lot of questions
being asked'**

unnecessary to tell people that sort of thing because it doesn't generally come up in conversation.'

We also heard that **teachers can often treat children in care differently from other children**. Some in our groups told us that teachers don't listen to children in care. Others said that 'you're chosen to do things because you're in care'. One group told us that teachers sometimes think children in care are poor, and give unwanted and unnecessary sympathy. Sometimes 'people make excuses for you because you are in care'. One young person told us how they had noticed a definite change in the way they were treated at school once they had come into care: 'teachers treat me differently from when I wasn't in care'.

Being in care could make you more likely to get into trouble with some teachers, but more likely to get away with things with other teachers. In one group, we were told that at school someone in care can more easily get into

trouble than other children: 'if you've both done wrong you get into more trouble than the other student would'. In another group, though, we heard an example of this working the other way around: 'if I got into trouble I can get away with more because they say, she's got troubles or going through a rough patch, whereas others would get into trouble'.

One person told us how being in care had changed how she was treated when she had committed a crime: 'shopkeeper let me get away with shoplifting because it was brought up I was in care'. Another told us they thought that some courts treated children in care differently: 'think you can't handle prison because you've been through enough so treat you differently and let you off with more'. However, different people had very different views and experiences about whether being in care made you more likely to get into trouble, or to get away with things. Another person in the same group told us that in their view, the police tend to see children in care as troublemakers.

Our planetarium voting group thought that **children in care do get the same chances to do well in education** as everyone else at school. Out of the 15 who voted on this, 11 said they do get the same chances, and only three said they don't. We did hear of some problems at school from other groups. For some, there can be a problem in getting permission for important things, because children in care need carers' or social workers' permission, this takes time, and teachers can sometimes delay sending information until it is really too late.

Children described for us some of the ways that **others made assumptions about children in care**. One said 'you're stereotyped because they think your parents don't want you'. Another said that 'they ask you "is it like Tracy Beaker?" [the TV programme], which portrays being in care as an easy situation, which it's not'. One group summarised people's assumptions like this: 'you're either portrayed as being shy and quiet, or really loud. You can't just be a normal person!'

In one group, we were told that teachers tend to assume that 'you are thick' if you are in care. A student in care told us 'there are expectations that you'll be aggressive, violent and rude. A tutor said she thought I would be like that because I was in care'. In another group, we heard that teachers can assume that it's bad for people to be in care,

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and can give them extra help. Sometimes they make special allowances for people in care: 'if you get low marks you get to do the test again because they say you're going through a bad time'. Such things are perhaps good for children in care, but people didn't feel it was always right: 'it's good but not fair. Other kids aren't given the same opportunity'.

For some discussion groups, being in care had very good results. Care leaver services had worked well. **Some care leavers said that being from care had helped them to get housing that other young people would not have been able to get:** 'yes, we get housed and given more help compared to others who don't get enough help. As soon as we're 18 we go to the top of the waiting list and get housed'. Some groups were worried that this could seem unfair: 'it's good for us, but unfair on others not in care'. One group told us that **being in care made a big difference to spending time with their brothers and sisters** who lived in different places. Being in care had stopped them from 'seeing siblings without being supervised'.

Groups told us about how they felt **more closely supervised than children who were not in care.**

Sometimes foster carers kept a much closer watch over where children in their care went out to than parents did with their own children, perhaps because your own parents knew you better and knew how far to trust you, while foster carers had rules to follow. For a child in care, **staying out late could have bigger results than it usually did for other children:** 'they'd tell me to be in at certain times and send the police to get me if I was late'.

Another group told us that their experience of health care was very different from that of people who weren't in care: 'have to have medical exams because you're in care'. Someone also wrote in their survey response that they were treated worse for being in care because they had to have a children in care 'medical at school'.

Discussion groups spoke with us about how **other young people don't have the experience of leaving care.** This could be either good or bad, as always depending on the individual and on the help they were given. One person who saw this as good described their experience of getting ready to leave care for us: 'get a 12-step plan which you go through with a social worker and put in order of what goes first. Get shown how to budget and make a meal. It would

be harder for friends not in care'. Another, who saw leaving care as a negative experience, said: 'at home, you don't have to leave care when you're 18 – you can stay as long as you want. In this country you can stay in education up to 23. Why should social services make us leave if they're meant to be our corporate parent?'

Just a few children told us about how they had been very badly treated by adults who were supposed to be caring for them: 'in another placement... beaten me, being horrible to me'; 'made me wash my clothes in bucket outside because I could not put in washing machine with theirs'.¹

'you get labelled for being in care'

'expect me to kick off all the time'

¹ As always, we check up on bad things that children tell us have happened to them, to see if something needs to be done about that now.

Does being in care make you feel different from other children or young people?

In the survey, we asked whether children in care ever felt different from other children or young people because they were in care. Again, 309 children answered this question.

Almost exactly half said yes, they had felt different, and half said no, they hadn't ever felt different, because they were in care.

Girls were more likely than boys to say they had felt different to other children and young people because they were in care. Sixty per cent of girls said they had felt different, compared with 38% of boys. Children who had been in care longest (for over six years) were the most likely to say that they felt different to people not in care. As one person put it in one of our groups: 'you get used to it because it gets drummed in to you'. Another said that 'it depends on how long you have been in care because you don't know how you would have been if you hadn't been in care'.

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There was no big difference between children in children's homes and children in foster care in how likely they were to feel different from other children for being in care. Disabled children were no more likely than others to say that being in care made them feel different from other children.

Here are the main ways in which people said they had felt different (the percentages are out of the 309 people who answered the question):

Not being with own family (20% of children)

Having different life experiences from other people (13% of children).

We have already been told that **being away from your own family was for many one of the worst things about being in care, and it was also the one thing most likely to make someone in care feel different from others.**

Boys were more likely than girls to say that they felt different because they had **different life experiences from other people. Hearing other children and young people talking about their own families** could make children in care feel very different and left out.

Where they did feel different, those who had been in care longest (for over six years) said this was more likely to be because they were not living with their family. Those who had been in care for less than two years were more likely to say that they felt different because other people talked about them being in care.

Examples of having different life experiences and feeling different from other children were: 'you see groups of families and feel like I wish I could be with mine, you want to turn back time and relive your life and not be in care'; 'you start blaming yourself for what you've done and start doing things differently – trying to think of a way to correct it and make it better for yourself'; 'you feel depressed and upset because those outside get other treatment'; 'sometimes it can be more unsettling the more times you are moved'. One group agreed that 'we get special treatment but we shouldn't, we should get the same'.

Being in care could make a difference to making friends. One group told us that people can make friends with you because they feel sorry for you, or because they

think that you are coping well with things even though you are in care. Some friends stay away from you as soon as they find out you're in care. One group told us 'if you tell your friends it can go against you. You can get into fights. People get to know your weak points and use that to upset you. When they know, they chastise you'. A person in another group said 'I've lost quite a few friends coz they see me as being different and don't want to be friends any more'. One girl told us 'boys are put off if you're in care'.

Where they did feel different from people not in care, those in children's homes were clearly more likely than those in foster care to say this was because they were not living with their family.

Among the other things that made some children in care feel different, but which came from fewer than one in 10 children, were other people thinking you are different from them; feeling sad, angry, upset or insecure; not being able

to have friends to stay or stay with friends; and just the fact of having a social worker or going to reviews. Seven children told us that other children had not wanted to be friends with someone in care.

We know that feeling safe is very important for children, and we asked our planetarium voting group whether they thought children and young people in care are as safe from dangers as people who aren't in care. Fifteen people in this group voted on this, and they were split almost evenly on the answer. **Eight said they thought children in care are as safe as other children, but seven said they thought they aren't as safe as children who aren't in care.**

Another important thing for children is being healthy, so we asked our planetarium group to vote on this too. **Most (11 out of the 15 who voted this time) told us that they did think that children and young people in care are usually able to stay as healthy as people who aren't in care.**

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Does being in care affect activities?

Being able to do more activities than other children just made it onto the list of the main ‘best things’ about being in care. In the survey, we asked children and young people to tell us about things that they had been able to do because they were in care that they probably wouldn’t have been able to do otherwise. Then we asked about things that being in care had stopped them from doing. Again, we didn’t make any suggestions.

We had 270 answers about things that being in care had made children and young people able to do. Here are the main activities they told us they had only been able to do because they had come into care:

- Join clubs and activity groups** (39% of children)
- Go on trips and holidays** (27% of children)
- Get a better education** (11% of children)
- Get better support** (11% of children)
- Go out more with friends** (10% of children).

The message from children is that **being in care can mean being able to do more activities, including hobbies, trips, holidays and being out with friends, but care can also bring support for personal problems and better education.** As one of our discussion groups said, ‘you get to do stuff which is funded because social services have got more money being our corporate parent’. Or, as another group said, ‘can do school trips because they’re free now I’m in care’. One person told us ‘when I was at home I couldn’t do any hobbies, but I can with carers’. One child wrote on their survey that being in care had meant ‘being myself and acting like a child’.

Getting support was not exactly what our question had asked about, but so many children and young people put it on their list anyway that we must see this as an important answer. In our groups, we heard that this **support could mean both getting help with problems, and being safer than outside care.** The longer children had spent in care, though, the less likely they were to add ‘getting support’ to their list.

Boys were more likely than girls to say there was nothing that being in care had meant they were able to do. Children who told us they had a disability were less

likely than others to say that being in care had stopped them from having overnight stays with friends.

Answers from fewer than one in 10 children included 23 children who said that being in care meant more opportunities; 18 children saying they had a safer and caring family to live with; and nine children saying that in care they could have more fun. Twenty-three children (9% of those who answered the question) said that there was nothing that they could do more as a result of being in care.

When we asked what, if anything, being in care had stopped children from doing, 229 children answered. Here are their main answers:

- Nothing** (31% of children)
- Going out with friends** (27% of children)
- Seeing family (and brothers and sisters) regularly** (26% of children)
- Overnight stays with friends** (13% of children).

‘I have been able to do more hobbies I enjoy. I have been able to be generally happier’

‘we can go bowling. We can go to the cinema. We can go abroad’

It is worth noting that for **31% of children there was nothing that coming into care had stopped them from doing. For around a quarter of children, coming into care had stopped them seeing their family, including their brothers and sisters, regularly. Care also made a difference to what you could do with friends. Over a quarter of children said that once in care, they couldn't go out as much with their friends. One in eight said that being in care stopped them from going for sleepovers or overnight stays with friends.**

There were no big differences between boys and girls in things that being in care had stopped them from doing. **Children in foster care were more likely than those in children's homes to say that being in care had not stopped them from doing anything.** We did get some big differences in answers depending on how long children had spent in care. **People who had been in care for less than two years were most likely to say that being in care stopped them from going out and seeing friends, and people who had spent over six years in care were most likely to say that being in care had stopped them from seeing their family, including their brothers and sisters, regularly.** Children who had been in care for less than two years were also the most likely to make the positive comment that coming into care had stopped them from smoking, drinking and using drugs.

As well as care stopping children from doing some things that they might have wanted to do, we heard about some problem things that being in care stopped children from doing. Seventeen children said being in care stopped them from doing things like smoking, drinking alcohol, or taking drugs. Ten children said that coming into care had stopped them from getting into trouble and misbehaving.

One discussion group told us about how schools can stop children in care from doing the things other children could do. We heard, for example, that in their school children in care had been stopped from playing sports or going camping because the school staff didn't know the procedures to follow if there was an accident to a child in care.

As we have already heard, our groups told us that **children in care can often do more activities than other children.** One group agreed that they had been 'given more access to things than if I'd been at home'. One person gave us their example of this: 'wouldn't be able to do horse riding

if not in care'. Others told us that they had been taken on more trips, and another that they had their gym fees paid. One person told us they had been chosen to play the drums because they were in care. In one group, we heard how a faith leader had helped a child in care to keep going to an activity: 'heard I was in foster care and asked me if I wanted to go back to a club I'd left'.

'being in care has given me lots of opportunities'

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Visiting friends

In our survey, we asked a question about what difference being in care had made to being able to visit or stay with friends. These had come up on the list of things that being in care can stop young people from doing.

Here are the main differences that the 217 children who answered this question told us about:

- Not allowed overnight stays** (44% of children)
- Being in care makes no difference** (28% of children)
- Not so easy to go to friends' houses** (11% of children)
- Need permission to visit friends** (10% of children).

Clearly, children told us that **being in care can mean not being allowed to stay overnight in friends' houses as much as other children do**. Forty-four per cent of the 217 children who told us how being in care affects visiting

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friends said that they are not allowed overnight stays, and from the last question we know that for 13% of children this is one of the main changes being in care has made to their activities.²

Importantly, though, 28% of children told us that being in care had made no difference at all to visiting or staying with friends. Only eight children said that being in care had made it easier to visit or stay with friends, or to have them visit or stay. Just one person said that having transport available made it easier to visit friends once they came into care.

Rules about staying with friends, however, made much more difference to girls than to boys. Girls were more likely than boys to tell us in the survey that they were not allowed to stay overnight with friends if their parents had not been police checked. **Exactly half the girls (50%) in our survey said they were not allowed to stay overnight with friends whose parents hadn't been police checked, compared with 37% of the boys.**

Where children were placed in care also made a big difference to whether they were allowed overnight stays. **Forty-nine per cent of children living in children's homes were not allowed to stay overnight with friends unless their parents had been police checked, compared with 36% of foster children.** Disabled children were, however, more likely than others to be allowed to stay overnight with friends without their friends' parents having to be police checked, and were also more likely to be able to visit friends' houses.

As we might expect, the longer children and young people had spent in care, the more likely they were to report that they had not been allowed to stay overnight with friends whose parents hadn't been police checked.

As well as problems with permission, children in our groups talked about other ways in which being in care affected how easily they could visit or stay in touch with friends. Sometimes you were **placed too far away to visit friends**, and sometimes there was not enough public transport to get to them and back again. You were most likely to be **unable to keep in touch with friends you had made in your old school, or where you had lived before being moved somewhere new.** Even if you did keep in contact, not visiting or spending time together meant gradually losing touch: 'I have not been able to see my best friend

² The Government issued a circular in 2004 saying that carers have to decide whether to give permission for overnight stays each time, but friends' parents don't all have to be police checked.

because I moved away. It seems a bit odd when we talk to each other because we've both changed.'

Sometimes there were **rules that might have been made for people's safety, but which also stopped people making or spending time with friends**. In one group we heard that boys and girls were not allowed to go into each other's rooms in their establishment, which meant that it was more difficult to make friends of the opposite gender. One person told us that they had been stopped from playing football, and that this had also meant that they missed out on seeing the friends they had made there.

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'can't coz all my mates are bad people'

'I lost contact with my friends when I went into care'

'mates' mums have to be police checked for me to stay over'

'risk assessments have put my friends' parents off'

What the general public thinks of children in care

In the survey, 229 children told us what they believed the general public thinks people from care are like. We wanted to find out what children in care thought about how other people see them – so we need to remember that these are the views of children in care, not something the general public itself has told us.

Here are the main things the children told us about the general public's view of children in care, as they saw it:

- That they are bad and uncontrollable** (48% of children)
- That they are troublemakers** (23% of children)
- They feel sorry for children in care** (13% of children)
- That they are the same as anyone else** (10% of children).

Clearly, children in care believe that the public generally has a negative view of them. **Almost half the children thought the public saw children in care as bad and uncontrollable, and just under a quarter thought they were seen as troublemakers. One in eight children in care thought the public felt sorry for them, and only one in 10 that the public thought children in care are the same as other children.** Two quotes from our survey describe how these children thought the public sees children in care: 'badly behaved. Can have things wrong with them. Stupid. No education. Think it's their own fault they're in care. Think they have bad parents. May be into drink and drugs'; 'naughty, trouble, different, low expectations, follow parents' pattern, can't be trusted, single you out'.

Some children in our survey did tell us that **not all members of the public think the same about children in care.** 'Some people don't want to know you, but some people do because they think you are the same as them, which you are.' 'People have different views: some think we're all trouble, others understand something must have gone wrong at home, whether it's our fault or not.' What members of the public think of children in care also depends on the individual child: 'depends on what the child is like. Because some could be shy, lazy, mean, angry, naughty and so on. But ordinary children can be those too'.

Some in our groups blamed the media for how children in care are seen by the public: 'if something bad happens

everybody knows about it, but as soon as anything good happens it's not reported'; 'people get wrongly told and it makes negativity even worse'.

One discussion group summarised how they thought the public saw children in care, and how this compares with what being in care was really like for them: 'some people have a bad view of care. They think you're rowdy, noisy and have an ASBO [anti-social behaviour order]. It's not that true. You go through emotional, angry and difficult stages but get to change your life around and get through them'. The same group said, 'they probably feel sorry for you or give you a dirty look'. Another group said people give you weird looks, and most people assume you take drugs. One quote from our survey was typical of many: 'they always think the worst of U'.

Girls were more likely than boys to believe that the general public saw people in care as bad and uncontrollable. Children living in children's homes were also more likely than those in foster care to believe that the public saw children in care as bad, uncontrollable and as troublemakers. Children who told us they had a disability were more likely than other children to believe that the general public saw children in care as troublemakers.

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How long a person had spent in care made a difference to how they thought the public saw those in care. **The longer someone had been in care, the more likely they were to believe that the public saw children in care as bad and uncontrollable.** Thirty per cent of those who had been in care for less than two years believed the public saw them this way. This went up to 48% of those who had been in care for two to six years, and 72% of those who had been in care for over six years.

Fewer than one in 10 children thought the public saw those in care positively, as 'OK' or 'good'. **Eighteen children (8%) believed the public saw children in care positively** like this. Fourteen children thought the public sees them as children being helped with problems and 11 that the public sees them as children whose parents cannot look after them – but four children thought the public thinks children in care are all like Tracy Beaker on the TV or in the story books. The 15 children and young people in our planetarium voting group were divided almost equally on the question of whether children in care generally get treated unfairly by other people just for being in care. Eight told us that children in care are in their experience treated unfairly sometimes, quite often, or most of the time. The other seven said that in their experience, children in care are never or hardly ever treated unfairly just for being in care.

Our discussion groups talked about **how the way the public sees children in care could be improved.** Some groups thought that the public simply needed a lot more information about children and young people in care, and that websites like YouTube could be used for this. There could be regular bulletins giving a positive image to the public about children in care and good things happening. The media could do more to give a positive image of children in care and care leavers.

Others thought that **children in care could themselves do more to tell other people about care, and to show that children in care are normal people.** As one put it, 'children in care should go around telling them how it really is'. Another group thought people in care should 'make them listen so they know we're exactly the same as them, not aliens'. Some of the public's views can be true of some children in care, but not of others. It was important to make other people realise that 'it's more to do with the individual person' than the public thinking that all people in care are

the same. The public will think people in care are different from them, but not different from each other, if 'they don't know you properly' as an individual.

One group, from their discussion, thought that discrimination against people from care was just another form of discrimination that can't really be stopped: 'it's just one more thing to discriminate people for. It's part of life. If it wasn't that it'd be something else'.

'I get labelled as a troublemaker because I'm in care'

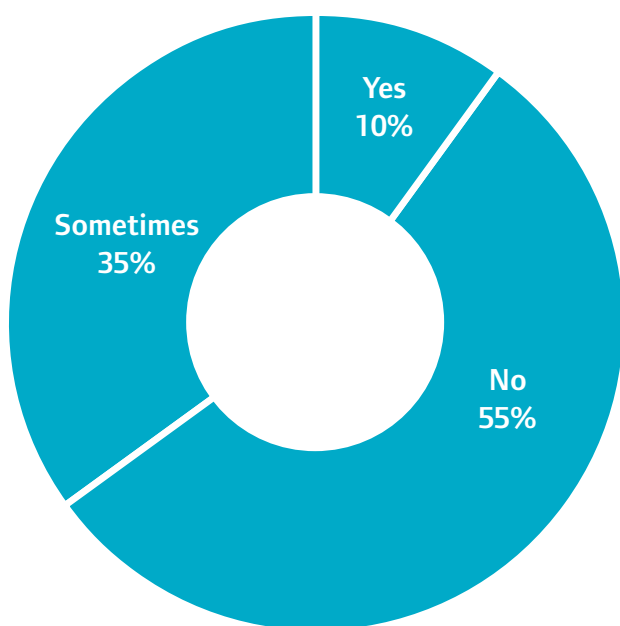
'people generalise children whether you're in care or not'

Do children in care worry about people knowing they are in care?

When we asked this question in our survey, we had answers from 276 children and young people. The chart shows their answers. **Over half (55%) said they did not generally worry about people knowing they were in care, 35% said they ‘sometimes’ worried, and 10% said that they definitely did worry about people knowing.** One person wrote in their survey response about ‘the stigma that comes from being in care’.

There were no big differences between boys and girls, or between foster children and children living in children’s homes, in how likely they were to worry about people knowing they were in care. How long someone had spent in care didn’t make a difference.

Figure 2: Do children worry about people knowing they are in care?



We asked children and young people who had said they were worried about people knowing they were in care to tell us why they were worried. We had answers to this from 80 people in our survey. Here are their top answers:

Because people will then judge the young person (from 32 children)

Because they might get bullied for being in care (from 23 children)

Because people might treat them differently (from 14 children)

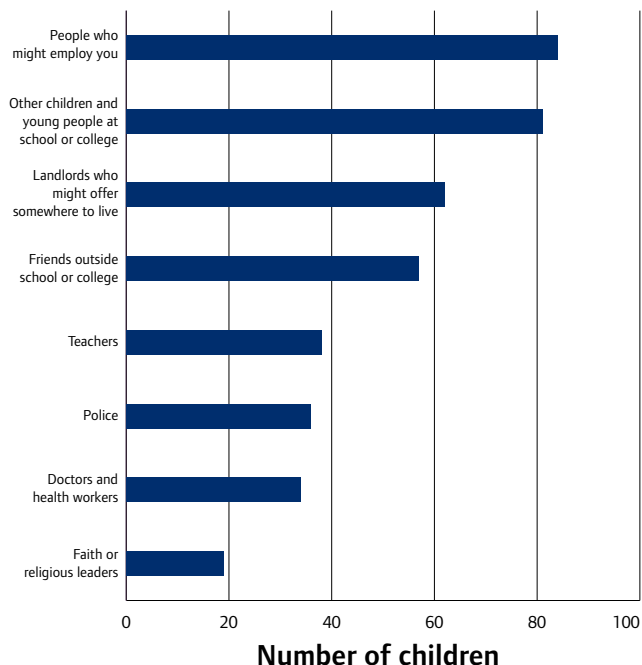
For personal reasons (from 10 children).

Overall, therefore, **45% of children told us that they definitely worried, or worried sometimes, about people knowing they were in care.** Where people gave us their reasons for worrying, these were mainly to do with the way other people might react if they knew they were in care – **judging them, bullying them, or generally treating them differently from people not in care.** Some quotes from our survey give examples of these worries: ‘they might use it against me or jump to conclusions about me’; ‘they might think I’m bad’; ‘they will think of me differently just because I’m in care!’ Just two children told us they were ‘ashamed’ of being in care.

Children in children’s homes were more likely than foster children to say they were worried about people judging them. The longer children had spent in care, the more likely they were to worry about people judging them, putting bullying as their second worry.

We went on to ask which particular types of people children would worry about knowing they were in care. When we asked this question in our survey, we did this time give a list of suggestions for people to choose from. The chart shows the numbers of children who told us they would be worried about each of the groups of people on our list knowing they were in care.

Figure 3: Which groups of people do children worry about knowing they are in care?



Out of those children who did worry about other people knowing they were in care, there is clearly a lot of concern about how employers who might offer jobs, and landlords who might offer accommodation, would react if they knew the young person came from care. There was also a lot of concern about the way other children or young people were likely to react, especially those who were at the same school or college, but also friends from other places. In one discussion group, we were told how important it is that children can decide for themselves whether or not to tell other children or young people that they are in care, so that ‘you can tell them as much as you like, or as little’.

Boys and girls, foster children and children from children’s homes, and disabled children all named the same three sorts of people they most worried about knowing they came from care: other children or young people; possible landlords; and possible employers. How long children had spent in care made no difference; those who had spent different lengths of time in care also put the same three sorts of people top of their lists. In our discussion groups, children also told us how worried they were that being

in care would affect their chances of getting a job. Some thought that employers would be less likely to give a job to someone from care. Others said that being in care might mean they got worse grades at school or college, and that in turn would make it harder to get a job. One group was concerned that if you had any problems that came from being in care, the mixture of having problems and being from care might make employers think you were likely to be a threat to their company.

Different groups had **different views about how much difference being in care made to getting a job.** Our planetarium voting group mostly thought that young people leaving care do have the same chances of getting a good job as people who haven’t been in care. Nine out of the 15 who voted on this thought they do have the same chances, while three thought they didn’t. One of the discussion groups didn’t think that being from care would make a big difference to getting a job if you could do the job, and said they had been ‘put in contact with

‘because they might not want to know me’

‘because they will ask why I am in care’

loads of people and they teach you how to get through an interview’.

Worries that **being from care might make it difficult to get accommodation** in the future were common in our groups. In one group though, the point was made that, as always, this depended on what the individual did to get over this. They thought it depended on how you looked to other people. If you looked as if you couldn’t keep yourself clean, then people with accommodation to offer would think ‘how are you going to keep a house clean?’

Children also **worried about how professionals like teachers, the police, doctors and other health workers might react to them if they knew they were from care**, but had fewer worries about how faith or religious leaders might react. In one discussion group, children told us they were less worried about the police knowing they were in care, because they thought that the police have to treat

children in care the same as every other person. Four children said they were worried about other members of their family, who did not know they were in care, finding out, and four said they were worried about their partner finding out they were in care.

Some children told us **very different experiences, some good, some bad, that had happened to them once their teachers knew they were in care**. One good experience was that: ‘teachers don’t want to upset you. They try to treat you the same and not make an issue’. But one bad one was that: ‘teacher had pictures of all the people in care on their wall for all to see’. Confidentiality was a big problem for some at school. Some in our groups told us that teachers had left confidential files lying around and these had been seen by other people who then found out someone was in care. Some told us that at school, they had been given messages in front of other children that marked them out as in care: ‘in front of class, teacher told me my

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‘I do tell people at school but they sometimes make fun of me’

‘they may be dubious about me and often stereotype me’

foster carer was here to pick me up'; 'teacher told me my social worker here for your prep meeting... causes people to ask questions!'

The group of children who voted on issues in the planetarium told us that some of these people were more likely than others to treat someone in care unfairly. Other children and young people, either at the same school or college or outside, were, they thought, more likely than adults to treat children in care unfairly. Among adults, they thought that people running clubs or other activities for children and young people were more likely than others to treat children in care unfairly, followed by the police, then teachers, with doctors and health workers the least likely to treat them unfairly.

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Last words

As often happens in our consultations, different children and young people had very different views and experiences, and often held opposite views about the same things. Whether being in care is a good or a bad thing, and whether people's reactions to someone coming from care are good or bad, all depend on the individual. As many children and young people have stressed to us, each person from care is an individual, not just a 'person from care'. One group summed up what a lot of others had said, when they told us that being in care is not so bad, but how good it is does depend on where you live, and on the workers and supporters you have: 'it's not that bad because we do get a lot of help. We take it because it's there and it becomes part of life. But it depends on where you live as to how much help you get'. One young person asked us to include this view of children in care in this report:

'People shouldn't think of us as an item. If we've been moved away from people we love, and moved often, then of course we're going to be different!'

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