APSW Association of Professors of Social Work

research in practice

Knowledge and Evidence Briefing 4

Children in care and care leavers

August 2021

The fourth and final event reviewed research knowledge about social work and social care with children living within care settings arranged by local authorities/trusts. It was facilitated by Professors June Thoburn and Elsbeth Neil from the University of East Anglia. Key points from each presentation and the chat contributions are outlined below. Recordings, slides and references are available at https://apsw.org.uk/kee-recordings.

About the KEEs

In May and June 2021, the UK's Association of Professors of Social Work (APSW) delivered four on-line Knowledge and Evidence Events (KEEs) to highlight key research messages about children's social care and social work. The KEEs were intended to spark debate and, in doing so, positively inform the work of the 'once-in-a-generation' review of children's social care commissioned by the Department for Education.

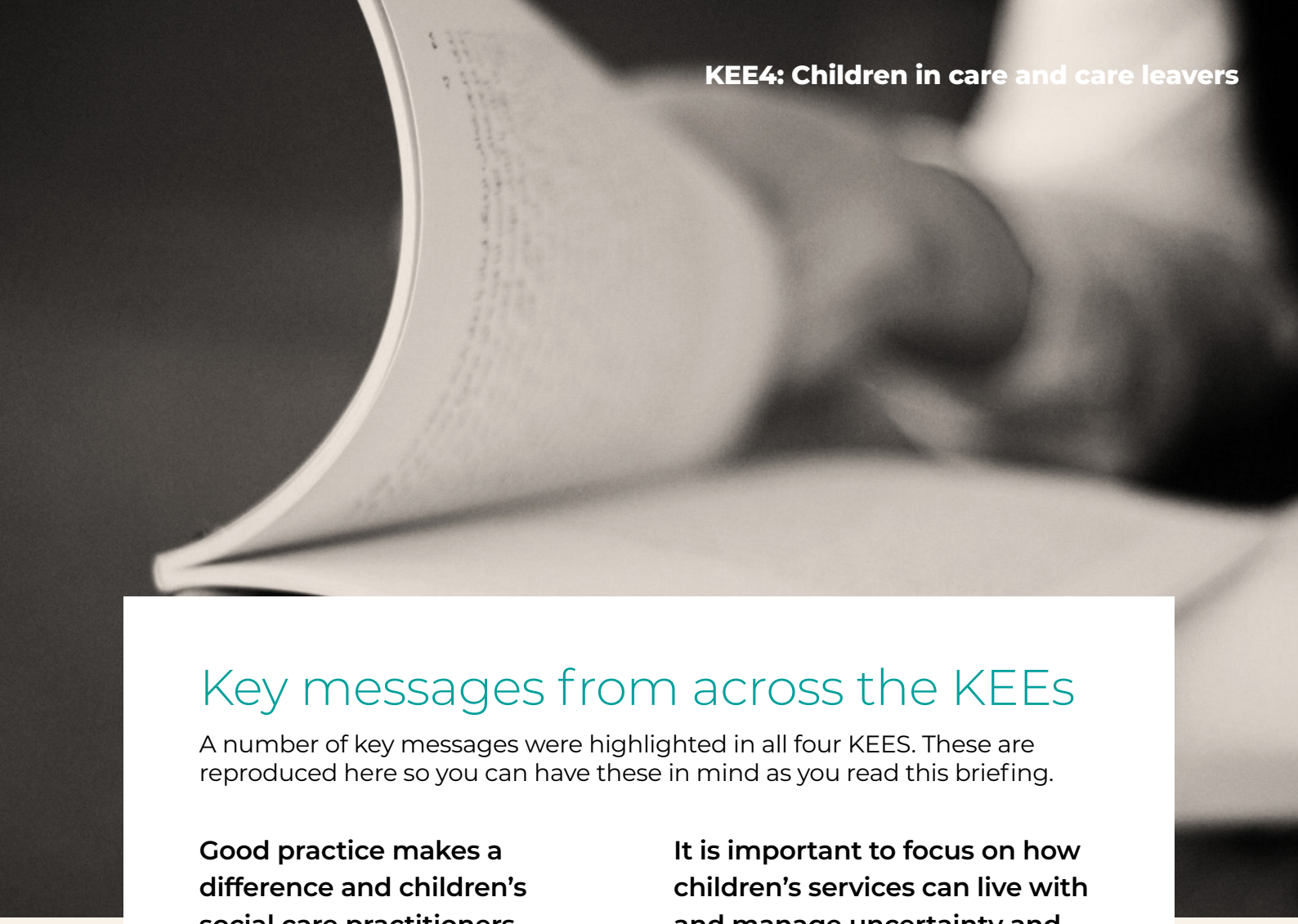
Each of the four KEEs featured presentations by professors of social work and social policy. All had experience as frontline practitioners within children's social care and social work, and as researchers, educators, managers and leaders within children's social services in the UK and internationally.

The four KEEs focussed on:

Within each KEE there was the opportunity for those attending to contribute comments via the chat function. There was keen interest in the KEEs with hundreds of people attending from a wide range of roles in children's social care.

You can watch the full recording of each event by clicking on 'View event blog' on the APSW website.

APSW and Research in Practice have developed four short briefings linked with each KEE session. Each briefing highlights key messages from speaker's presentations, the chat contributions and identifies overarching themes. Reflective questions (suggested by the presentations) which focus on improving practice with children and families and links to additional resources you may find useful are also provided. The briefings are relevant to anyone working in children's social care.



Key messages from across the KEEs

A number of key messages were highlighted in all four KEES. These are reproduced here so you can have these in mind as you read this briefing.

Good practice makes a difference and children's social care practitioners make a difference.

Practice must be morally and socially just.

Compassionate and curious relationships are crucial in children's social care.

Continuity and stability in services and child/family-professional relationships are essential.

We need to embrace courageous creativity over compliance.

It is important to focus on how children's services can live with and manage uncertainty and risk.

The importance of adopting systemic perspectives that avoid blaming individual practitioners.

The impact of poverty and social/economic inequality on the everyday lives of children and families.

Fragmentation of services should be avoided.

Permanence with birth parents or relatives

Elaine Farmer
Emeritus Professor, University of Bristol

Professor Elaine Farmer's research focuses on reunification and kinship care. She has led a number of research studies which explore decision-making and outcomes when children return home from care to live with either birth parent(s) and/or kinship carers.

Key points

Reunification research shows

- The important part that returning to live with parent(s) plays in children's lives. Improving practice to ensure safe and stable return home is vital if children's life chances, in or out of care, are to be improved.
- Return to parents is the most usual way that children exit from care, but this presents more risks for stability and safety than other options. However, there has been very little focus on this area of practice.
- Often, insufficient services are available to help parents overcome their difficulties, meaning children may be returned to parents whose difficulties have not been addressed.
- Breakdown rates and the quality of returns vary greatly by local authority, suggesting that variations in practice are a factor in whether reunification is successful or not.

What needs to change?

- Children should return to parents only after sufficient time has elapsed and the problems that led to entry to care have been addressed.
- Engaging parents and children in the process of reunification is associated with positive outcomes.
- Social work intervention and services for parents (particularly specialist services for alcohol and drugs misuse) need to be provided at a sufficiently intensive level in order for parents to make and sustain change.
- Funding suitable services for reunification can support later cost avoidance by reducing reunification breakdowns and associated care costs.
- Foster carers and residential workers are an untapped resource to support returns.
- Post-return services are needed for at least six months to help prevent breakdowns.
- Ofsted should include reunification services when inspecting local authority practice.

Kinship Care

- Approximately 180,000 children in the UK are being brought up by a relative.
- Kinship carers face significant financial pressures, and too often receive little/no support. Many face multiple disadvantages, e.g. poor health or housing.
- Kinship carers are highly committed, often caring for children with very complex needs, and this plays an important part in the relatively higher rates of stability.
- Children in kinship care can often fare better than those cared for by non-relatives – though can come at a cost to kinship carers, whose health and wellbeing, social and professional fulfilment and personal relationships can all suffer.
- Many kinship carers are concerned about the harmful effects of contact with birth parents (not attending contact, exposing children to considerable risk, undermining the placement or threatening/assaulting carers).
- Kinship carers and the children they care for need a greater policy focus. Practical, emotional and financial support are all vital, as is access to specialist services as required.

What do kinship carers need?

- Financial help, help with parental contact, emotional support and advice on legal options when considering caring for related children.
- Information about available services for the children needs to be provided as standard, alongside priority access to additional educational help and to child and adolescent mental health services (CAMHS) if needed.
- Assistance in managing children's behaviour.
- Help with the transition to adulthood (especially for the minority who leave kinship care under 18, who have very poor outcomes).
- Respite care/help with child sitting, especially if disability or poor health makes caring hard.
- The opportunity to attend a support group of kinship carers such as those provided by the Kinship Connected service.

University of BRISTOL

Permanent family placement: finding a secure base in long-term foster care and adoption

Gillian Schofield
Emeritus Professor, University of East Anglia

Professor Gillian Schofield's research interests focus on long-term foster care; attachment; looked after children and offending; care planning and the role of the Independent Reviewing Officer.

Key points

- The UK is unique internationally in having well-established routes to permanence through both adoption from care and long-term foster care.
- Both adoption and long-term foster care present challenges in recruitment and in offering the right support for very troubled children, especially early in placement and later in adolescence.
- Both permanence options can work well for children who cannot be cared for in their birth family, providing children with security, a sense of belonging and successful outcomes.
- It is essential to value, invest in and develop policy and practice in both adoption and long-term foster care. We can then choose and support the right placement for each child with confidence.

Adoption

- Adoption has generally positive outcomes and overall breakdown rates are low. However, adoption plans are not always achievable and there is a shortage of adopters for older children/sibling groups.
- Adopted children's developmental needs are a factor in successful placements e.g. genetic risk, pre-birth harm (e.g. Foetal Alcohol Syndrome) and experience of early adversity.
- Openness in adoption, including forms of direct contact with birth families, needs careful consideration as it can be valuable for children in achieving a coherent identity.
- Many adoptive parents report experiencing 'severe challenges' with older children.
- The provision of support services for adopted families must be an essential component of an adoption service.

Long-term foster care

- Long-term foster care is an important route to permanence. However, there is a wide variation between local authorities in how much this is used.
- Rigorous assessment and matching procedures are needed which must be flexible for older children and adolescents.
- Children in stable long-term foster care placements have similar educational, emotional and behavioural outcomes compared with adopted children.
- Well-supported, loving foster carers can provide a secure base for children. But if children are not loved or thriving, in spite of support, they need to move. A subsequent loving placement that is a better match can be transformational.
- Long-term foster carers need to be both skilled professionals and committed parents, who can also support the positive inclusion of the birth family in the child's life.
- 'Children's social worker' and 'foster carer' social worker roles are flexible in long-term foster care but the suggestion that one social worker could hold all roles is not currently supported by research.

UEA University of East Anglia

Key messages from research on children's residential care

David Berridge
Emeritus Professor, University of Bristol

Professor David Berridge has researched the experience of children in residential care, with a particular focus on educational outcomes, for over 30 years.

Key points

- The role of children's residential care in the UK has changed considerably over the past 40 years. It is now a much smaller, minority service. There is consensus that residential homes serve important functions for certain children in certain circumstances.
- We do not have good evidence on the outcomes of children's residential care. Most placements are short-term.
- There is some evidence of relatively lower educational attainments of children and young people in residential care.
- Key characteristics of successful residential care placements include:
  - placements as part of a continuum of care
  - positive relationships between staff and children
  - parents' involvement and support for them
  - a 'normal' home environment
  - good leadership with vision and purpose
  - highly skilled, motivated and qualified staff.
- Concerns exist about the 'under-professionalisation' of residential care linked to the relatively low pay and working conditions, and low level qualifications. This contrasts with many European countries.
- The majority of children's residential care is now privately-run and this proportion is growing. Private Equity ownership and funding are the most common models.
- Ten providers make up 30% of all residential places, and six providers supply 50% of all fostering places. Profitability is uneven and there is concern that some providers may cease to trade, as has already happened in adult services. This seems a very precarious national framework.
- There is concern about the extent and nature of unregulated provision (i.e. not covered by the law) which is intended to support over-16s to live 'independently' rather than be in full-time care.
- The former Children's Commissioner reported that one in eight of all children in care spent some time in unregulated accommodation over the course of a year. The growth in unregulated provision is probably fuelled by the lack of suitable children's homes places, especially for those with complex problems.
- There are strong arguments that all residential provision should be fully regulated, brought within the law and inspected by Ofsted.
- 16/17-year-old young people (and often younger) are, at times, placed in unregulated provision. This is too young an age to live 'independently'.

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What helps young people from care 'do well' in adulthood?

Ten messages from research for policy and practice

Mike Stein
Emeritus Professor of Social Work, University of York

Professor Mike Stein has conducted comparative research on young people in care and care leavers in the UK and internationally for a number of years.

Key points

What helps young people from care 'do well' in adulthood?

- Stable placements: love, attachments, cultural identity and continuity are all linked with adult wellbeing.
- Succeeding at school or later is a predictor of adult wellbeing, alongside social networks, leisure and new opportunities.
- It is important to address the reasons for underachievement which occur before, during and after being in care. For example:
  - pre-care: family poverty, maltreatment
  - in care: instability; insufficient help to catch-up; special educational needs and disabilities (SEND); missing school; poor self-belief; virtual schools not working well
  - post-16 support: further education and higher education; apprenticeships; careers.
- Participating: in decisions, knowing rights, a life story, culture and diversity. Young people need to have confidence and positive identity.
- Preparing young people to leave care: self-care, practical, inter-personal skills are all associated with coping well on leaving care.
- Leaving care later: extended care to age 21 plus gives greater opportunities for better education, wellbeing outcomes and ongoing support.
- Family, social networks: extended family, partner, friendship, community support – keeping links (including for young people from Black, Asian and minoritised groups).
- Leaving care services: can be effective in providing personal help, life skills, housing, finance, targeted education/employment and training (EET). They are also helpful in supporting young people with particular needs (for example: asylum seekers, young parents).

What do we need to do differently?

- Address inequalities which arise from variations in the range, quality and funding of services: e.g. unregulated accommodation, access to child and adolescent mental health services (CAMHS), placement choice and ensuring that personal advisers have time to build meaningful relationships with young people.
- Promote resilience across the life course:
  - Pre-care – prevent family poverty and maltreatment
  - In care – improve stability, diversity of carers, education, participation, social networks and give the option of 'staying put'
  - Post-care – extended support and transition to adult services.
- Recognise resilience and that the achievements and progress of many care-experienced adults are built from poorer starting points than young people who have not been in care.
- We need to address injustice and the fact that too many young people have to do it the hard way on their own.

UNIVERSITY of York

Themes and threads in the chat contributions

The NSPCC Reunification Framework is useful in practice (see open access resources section).

Residential care is the right choice for some children and young people (either short-term or as a permanence option).

Too many kinship carers are forced to beg or fight for support.

There are many ways 'contact' for children with their families can and should be facilitated rather than just scheduled at contact centres.

Foster carers are often not treated as professionals.

An approach informed by social pedagogy with its emphasis on relationships and shared experiences with children is valuable.

'Child' and 'foster carer' social worker roles should not be merged.

The importance of school and the support offered by the wider support system surrounding the child, their family and community.

Concern about under-professionalisation and the need for (clinical) supervision for workers in children's homes.

Concern about privatisation of foster care and residential care for children and young people and making money from vulnerable children.

The need for local authority residential care homes and to address the issue of unregulated provision.

The importance of learning from lived experience and from residential workers too.

We need to address the issue of siblings being separated in care.

We should not limit help and care by age boundaries into adulthood.

Many people do not like the term 'placement' – it's not a placement but a home, a family.

Reflections and the big messages from KEE4

Care can't take away all the harm from abuse and loss. Those who need to be in care, wherever they are placed, must receive love and safe and skilled parenting.

The safety and wellbeing of children are essential. But a 'rescue' mindset has to be avoided. First families, heritage, culture, ethnicity have life-long importance.

Children who come into care and their families need quality services and these may be required over the long term.

Skilled, committed social workers and multi-professional teams who listen, care, build relationships and stay around are essential.

Numbers of children and young people entering care can't be reduced without first providing sufficient services to support families under pressure.

Reflective questions inspired by KEE4

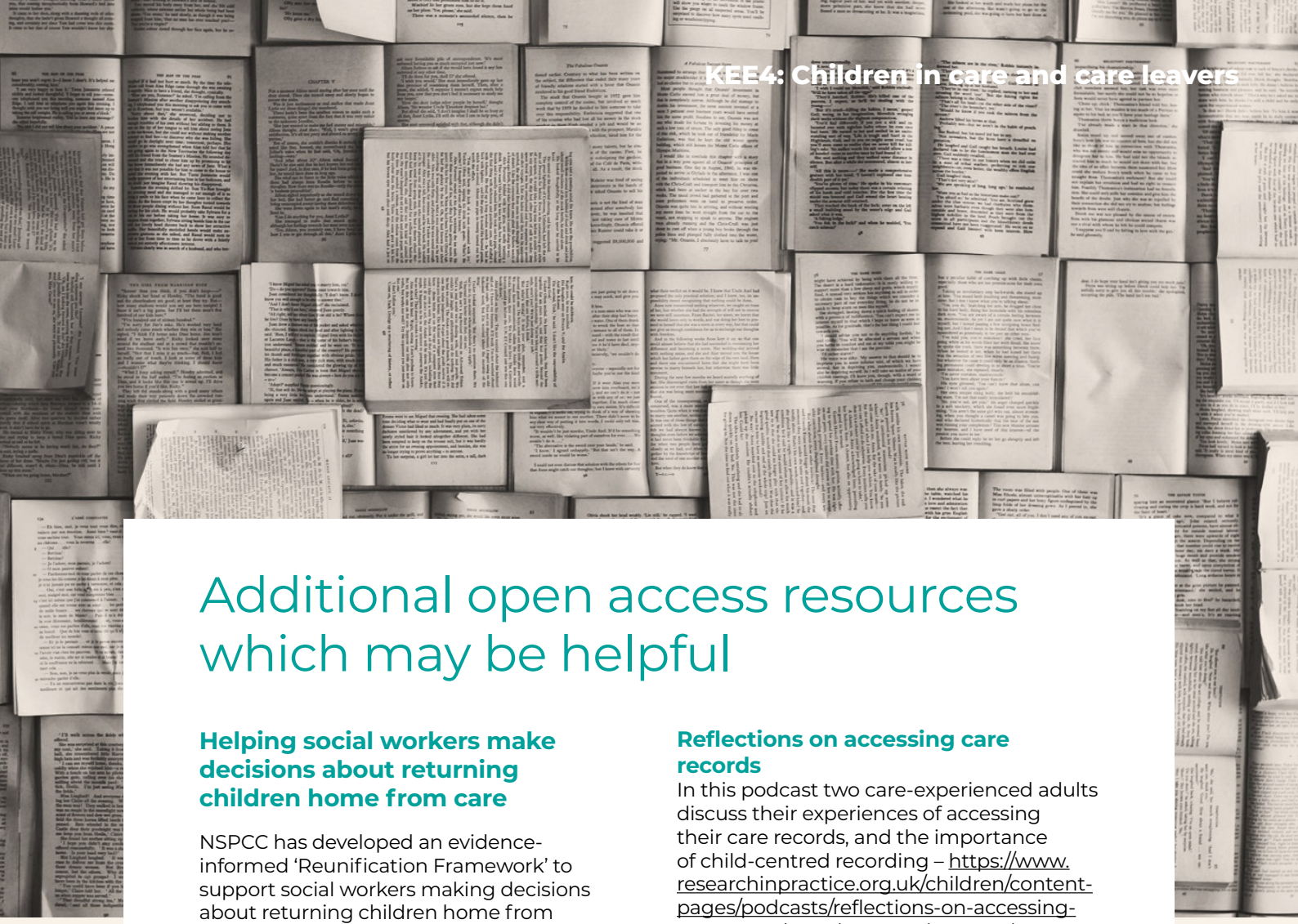
Listening to and acting on children and young people's wishes and feelings is one important feature of good social work practice and placement decision-making. How do you gather these in a developmentally-appropriate way?

Support services for children and young people, their parents and alternative carers are crucial. What pathways does your organisation have into specialist services and how might these be improved? How might you enable more equity of support for foster care, adoptive and kinship care families?

Residential care can be a good permanence option for some children and young people. How could those working in children's residential homes be supported to hone their skills and be recognised as key players in the wider workforce?

Recruiting and retaining committed, loving and skilled foster carers and adopters that can meet children's diverse and evolving needs is key. How does your organisation prepare and support foster carers for this rewarding but challenging role? How do you ensure that your assessment and matching processes meet the needs of children and young people who need alternative care?

Young people leaving care need practical and emotional support into early adulthood. How do you help them prepare for adulthood? What do young adults tell you about the quality of your support and how it could be further improved?



Additional open access resources which may be helpful

Helping social workers make decisions about returning children home from care

NSPCC has developed an evidence-informed 'Reunification Framework' to support social workers making decisions about returning children home from care. This resource was recommended by Professor Eileen Farmer in her presentation and in the chat contributions – https://learning.nspcc.org.uk/research-resources/2015/reunification-practice-framework

Contact after adoption

This website supports practitioners making post-adoption contact plans and supporting birth relatives, children and adopters to establish and maintain contact – https://contact.rip.org.uk/

The Bright Spots Programme

The Coram Voice website provides evidence on what children in care and leaving care say is important to them. It also showcases local authority/trust practice case studies – https://coramvoice.org.uk/for-professionals/bright-spots-2/

Reflections on accessing care records

In this podcast two care-experienced adults discuss their experiences of accessing their care records, and the importance of child-centred recording – https://www.researchinpractice.org.uk/children/content-pages/podcasts/reflections-on-accessing-care-records-and-supporting-good-recording/

Child-centred practice in Doncaster

This blog by Laura Gough discusses the mentalising assessment process and how this is supporting the wellbeing of children in care in Doncaster – https://www.researchinpractice.org.uk/children/news-views/2021/april/supporting-the-wellbeing-of-children-in-care-child-centred-practice-in-doncaster/