

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

CHILD & FAMILY
SOCIAL WORK

WILEY

'They feel like another child in care has their back': An exploration of peer support between looked after children in Scotland

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University of Stirling, Stirling, UK.Email: hre1@stir.ac.uk**Abstract**

The Independent Care Review in Scotland has encouraged a policy shift towards recognizing young people's potential to contribute to their own and others' experiences of care. This paper makes an important contribution to debates around the role of children in the social support systems of others who have experienced loss and trauma. It reports on a research project which explored young people's views on peer support in care and their experiences of it. It highlights the crucial role that 'peers' play in looked after children's social support systems at both an individual and systemic level. Friendships, in this context of a social support system based on a shared set of experiences, were regarded as transformative. Barriers to the formation of such social support systems also emerged, for example, limited understanding within the 'adult' support system of the significance and benefits of relationships among children. Young people experienced their peer social support systems as overlooked, downplayed or misunderstood by adults. As a result, decisions and actions were often taken which disrupted or, in some cases, destroyed effective social support systems. The paper argues for changes in practice to support the friendships looked after children have whilst in care.

KEYWORDS

friendships, looked after care, peer mentoring, social support systems

1 | INTRODUCTION

The Independent Care Review has encouraged a policy shift in Scotland towards meaningfully respecting and including the views of looked after children and young people (Scottish Government, 2020a). It has called for change at all levels of policy and practice in how, as a nation, its citizens and institutions respond to children who are in need of care and protection (Scottish Government, 2020a). The review and the resultant discourse surrounding it see children and young people as active

contributors in all aspects of their care, their participation bringing valuable benefits, such as improving their sense of belonging and creating services which have children's needs and wishes at the centre (Thomas, 2007; Willow, 2013). Whilst the notion of 'child centred practice' is in no way new, the Independent Care Review has forced many involved in child welfare to reflect deeply on the impact of the 'care system's' complex legal and policy framework and decision-making on individual children's everyday lived experience of being 'in care' (Scottish Government, 2020a).

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Children and young people's involvement in decision-making, planning and service design has highlighted the knowledge and skills that those with 'lived experience' contribute (Díaz et al., 2021; Pert et al., 2017). Increasingly, the role that young people play in shaping each other's experiences in looked after care is being explored (Stubbs et al., 2023), with research on such 'peer relationships' focusing on what might be considered the two ends of the spectrum: peer mentoring and peer abuse or harm. It has shown that peer mentoring between young people in care has the potential to combine the benefits of mentoring, such as increased confidence and improved school attendance (Philip & Spratt, 2007), with the valuable support that young people find in their peers in care (Mann-Feder, 2018). At the same time, research highlights the potential for bullying and coercion linked to encouraging peer relationships between 'at-risk' young people (McMahon & Curtin, 2013).

The research on which this paper is based sought to explore how young people felt about peer support and their views on where developments in social work practice could be made to assist such relationships. Unusually, it frames peer support as a 'specialist support system', pushing beyond the adult-focussed lens that analysis of services for children often has and, in turn, recognizing the naturally occurring nature of many relationships between young people (Darling et al., 2002). The paper explores some of the central themes emerging from the data, highlighting how peer support was constructed and understood by young people. It foregrounds the role that peers serve in children's emotional and physical well-being and in their protection against social adversity as well as their experiences of sharing day-to-day care with other children and young people and the very active role they play in their everyday care and support.

2 | 'PEER' SUPPORT IN CONTEXT

In Scottish legislation, 'looked after' children and young people are those under the care of the local authority, primarily due to being at risk of harm or neglect (Gilligan, 2015; HMSO, 1995; Scottish Government, 2021). Whilst this can relate to children and young people at home, it predominantly applies to those in foster, kinship and residential care; looked after children and young people often being referred to as 'in care' (NSPCC, 2021a; Scottish Government, 2021). Looked after children and young people may have experienced inconsistent care, neglect or trauma, which can leave them with complex emotional and mental health needs, including potentially low self-esteem and self-confidence (NSPCC, 2021a; Schwartz & Spiro, 2017). Their family context and subsequent looked after status may have resulted in further loss, transitions and moves of home and school, far more than other children of their age (Children's Society, 2015). Such disruption has shown to impact negatively on education, friendships and peer support (Negard et al., 2020; Scottish Government, 2020b). However, this is not to say outcomes would be better if children and young people were not looked after or in care (NSPCC, 2021b).

Friendships are a crucial factor in the well-being and resilience of looked after children and young people (Mann-Feder, 2018; Ridge &

Millar, 2000). Social support in the form of friendship offers valuable opportunities to develop social skills, help with stress, develop empathy for others and lessen the impact of adversity (Daniel & Wassell, 2002; Hartup, 1996), therefore potentially providing an important environment for looked after children to develop positive and supportive relationships (Hartup, 1996). However, children and young people in looked after care are likely to have experienced disrupted or unpredictable relationships which can impact how they relate to others (Winter, 2015). As such and alongside the impact of multiple moves of school and home, they are more likely to need high levels of support with managing and maintaining positive, supportive relationships with others (Boddy et al., 2020). For some children, such social support has come in the form of mentoring.

2.1 | Mentoring

Mentoring refers to the voluntary relationship between two people, one providing guidance and support to the other on their goals, such as independent travel or education (Karcher & Hansen, 2013; Move On, 2020). For children and young people, being mentored can support their social, emotional and communication skills, offer prosocial modelling and advocacy (DeWit et al., 2016; Rhodes, 2002), build self-confidence and improve educational outcomes (Philip & Spratt, 2007). Given the potential experience of unstable relationships and low self-confidence which looked after children and young people may have, these possible benefits make mentoring a valuable option (DeWit et al., 2016; Winter, 2015). Pairs are often matched based on shared interests and experiences (Karcher & Hansen, 2013); indeed, looked after children and young people have expressed a desire for care-experienced mentors (Cudjoe et al., 2020; Life Changes Trust, 2019).

Aside from a few examples of mentoring programmes recruiting mentors with care experience, it would seem that practice in this area is less well developed (Snow, 2013b). Research highlights the benefits of a shared experience of being in care. These include increased confidence (Mezey et al., 2015; Philip & Spratt, 2007), self-esteem and improved social skills (Turner, 1999) and feelings of belonging (Snow, 2013a). The impact on care-experienced mentors is also significant, with improved rates of university admissions (Mentoring and Befriending Foundation, 2012) and the potential to reimagine their sense of self (Benard, 1990).

Naturally occurring peer support in care settings, for example, young people in the same foster home offering support and advice to one another, is found to have important benefits for all concerned. Shifting a negative care narrative to one with the potential to bring feelings of pride about being looked after away from home and indeed in the care identity itself is one such potential benefit (Snow, 2013b). Feeling pride can be a vital protective factor for young people exposed to feelings of shame and stigma because of their care status (Randell et al., 2017). Young people in care suggest that the special nature of their shared experience with peers is important (Mann-Feder, 2018). These relationships feel different to those with

professionals (Stubbs et al., 2023), which often feature frequent change and feelings of a lack of control (Mentoring and Befriending Foundation, 2012; Philip et al., 2004). Given this, it is the experience of formal and naturally occurring peer mentoring relationships that form the focus of this paper.

2.2 | Friendship

Friendship is considered a fundamental human need (Daniel & Wassell, 2002; Roesch-Marsh & Emond, 2021) and key in identity development, providing an environment in which social skills and coping strategies are developed (Hartup, 1996). In friendships, young people can learn about others, gain emotional support (Legault et al., 2006) and access crucial help to navigate many of life's transitions and changes (Hartup & Stevens, 1997; Negard et al., 2020). Looked after children and young people are likely to experience more transitions and moves than others, both pre- and post-admission to care. This can be the result of factors such as poverty and homelessness (Bywater et al., 2019) as well as changes of care arrangements. Research indicates that looked after children and young people, who have experienced inconsistent care, trauma or disruptions, may also be more likely to experience inconsistent peer relationships (Connolly, 2014; Daniel & Wassell, 2002). However, such research may overlook or underplay their friendship skills. For example, in Emond's (2003) research with young people in residential care, significant strengths were demonstrated by young people in group living, remembering birthdays and showing love and care to one another. As such, friendship can offer children and young people opportunities for social support based on horizontal relationships, in contrast to the vertical, power-based relationships with professional adults (Negard et al., 2020; Roesch-Marsh & Emond, 2021).

Friendship appears to be a fundamental source of social support which has a significant impact on well-being through life. A lack of friendships has been linked to emotional difficulties, poorer social skills, lower school attainment and poorer capacity for managing conflict (Daniel & Wassell, 2002; Hartup, 1996). However, discourse concerning friendships and looked after children and young people often focusses on negative aspects, such as peer pressure, bullying and harm in group living (Emond, 2003; Roesch-Marsh & Emond, 2021). Whilst looked after children and young people are found to be more likely to experience bullying (Anti-bullying Alliance, 2022; Barter, 2003), research indicates that such negative framing of young people's relationships can, in itself, lead to an inflated focus on deficits (DeLuca & Claxton, 2018; Mann-Feder, 2018).

3 | METHODOLOGY

As highlighted in Section 1, this small, practice-based project aimed to examine the views and experiences of young people in care in relation to peer support. It was undertaken as a practitioner project (first author

being a social worker undertaking additional study) with ethical approval granted by the University of Stirling General Ethics Committee. It was guided by the following research questions: What is peer support between looked after children and young people?; what are children and young people's experiences of peer support?; and what do children and young people feel helps and hinders peer support? Given the focus on social supports and relational meaning within the context of care, the project was grounded in a broadly interpretivist position, exploring meanings of behaviour (Gray, 2018; Mason, 2018; McLaughlin, 2011) and providing scope to articulate the nuance and complexity of subjective lived experiences (Robson & McCartan, 2016).

As a result of the limited time and resource available to the practitioner researcher, the sample size was small. One local authority was approached to participate and agreed to share an email with all of its children and families social work staff. The email introduced the research topic and invited social workers to share an invitation to participate with young people aged 14–21, whom they were currently supporting. This initial email was sent to 140 social workers. Initially, only one responded, perhaps highlighting the challenges being faced by practitioners during COVID-19 restrictions. This may also be indicative of children being viewed as in need of care and protection rather than as active and able contributors (Murray, 2005). Purposive sampling was then used to reapproach social workers known to the researcher within the local authority. Whilst this method can produce research that may be hard to replicate (Asselin, 2003), it also can provide relevant research data (Denscombe, 2014; Flynn & McDermott, 2016). From this follow-up contact, eight young people agreed to meet with the researcher, and of these, seven took part.

Participants were aged between 14 and 18 and were looked after away from home at the time of field work. All consented to participate in a one off, in-depth semistructured interview. At participants' requests, most interviews were conducted at their homes, with one taking place on the phone. Interviews lasted 30–60 min. With participants' consent, the interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed. No incentives or compensation were provided for participation.

Research highlights that young people in care have expressed a preference for individual interviews, providing them with a sense of privacy and confidentiality as well as familiarity in interview settings (Punch, 2002). Time was taken with each participant to discuss the project, the aim and purpose of the interview and what would happen to their responses to the questions (Schofield & Beck, 2014). This included a discussion on the limits of confidentiality. Young people were made aware that any information which suggested a risk of harm would be shared with their social worker but that this would only happen with their knowledge. Information sheets were developed using jargon-free language and images, which reiterated all of the information above.

Participants were given pseudonyms, and any identifying information was removed or changed. In order to encourage a sense of control over the interview, topic cards were offered to allow young people to choose the question order (and to absent from topics if desired). Feeling a sense of control is an important aspect of research with children, particularly those in care, all of whom will have

experienced a number of 'interviews' with other adults, such as social workers and police (Emond & Burns, 2021). Often, such interviews result in changes in their lives and a limited sense of power over how their information is handled.

Data were coded and analysed using key principles of inductive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Approximately 80 codes were identified from 43 pages of interview transcriptions. Codes were then gathered and condensed into broader themes. Primary themes included as follows: what makes a friend; barriers to friendship; peers in care; and peer mentoring in care. Several subthemes were identified within each wider topic.

4 | FINDINGS

Findings are presented in line with the themes identified in the analysis. Their appearance is weighted in order of importance to the young people themselves and are discussed in relation to the current policy and the wider research context.

4.1 | What makes a friend?

To date, the importance of friendship to children and young people in care has largely been explored from an adult perspective (Benard, 1990; Daniel & Wassell, 2002; Hartup, 1996). More recently, there have been calls for research examining how children and young people themselves understand friendship and peer relationships (Negard et al., 2020; Roesch-Marsh & Emond, 2021). Participants in this study recognized the complex nature of friendships as social supports, highlighting the key elements of friendship they had experienced.

4.1.1 | Unconditional support

Young people talked at length about the qualities they felt were important in friendship. Several participants mentioned how vital it was for a friend to be there when needed and to 'have their back'. This appeared to mean a sense of the other person being not only available when it mattered, but that the friend would prioritize the relationship over other things. In many ways, the experience of having a friend who was 'there' also suggested a friend who was 'with' them, alongside them when needed. As Alana explains:

As a teenager especially, they're like one of your main supports, emm and to have your friends like always there, no matter where they are, especially for me, emm that's just a big thing If there's something wrong in the home, or you just need someone to talk to but you can't, don't feel like you can talk to a social worker or your carer or whatever, not parents,

whatever, friends: they're like always supportive, no matter what. (Alana)

The unconditional nature of friend relationships was vital to the young people interviewed, perhaps more so as many described having had less consistent experiences of family relationships. In this way, they viewed friends as a more reliable relationship (Winter, 2015). Participants also discussed friendships in contrast to what they described as conditional experiences with others, such as social workers and foster carers.

If you've got real friends they're always there, whereas a social worker isn't, can't always answer the phone. (Amy)

Because you don't always have a stable network of people that you can talk to about things, you can't go home and lash out, because you don't know if you can stay there after, you know? ... at least with your friends, you can rant, you can get it out and then they can go home and they can deal with their emotions separately. (Charlie)

4.1.2 | Trust

A dominant theme emerging from the data was the importance to young people of trust in friendship (Roesch-Marsh & Emond, 2021). Participants highlighted that information they shared would be handled differently by friends than by the adults around them. As found in other studies, they strongly indicated that they trusted friends more, describing a lack of control in their relationships with professionals (Mentoring and Befriending Foundation, 2012; Philip et al., 2004).

(Talking about a child she lived with) I think she felt more like she could like trust me more than an adult, I mean if something happened, cos adults can sometimes over exaggerate it or under exaggerate it and not feel the way the child's feeling but yeah, yeah I think she was happy with being able to say anything to me. (Cara)

Participants described turning to friends when they had a problem, rather than adults or professionals. Often adults were regarded as less reliable, including those looking after them. Some stated that in a crisis that they would lean on friends instead, at least in the first instance:

Yeah, I would have definitely have already told my friends, usually. They are my first go to. I think also if you're in care, you don't want to tell your foster parent if something's wrong because they might tell your social worker and then it gets escalated. (Charlie)

The need to almost rehearse sharing information with friends, before doing so with others, is explored in literature, positing friendship as a valuable relationship used by young people to practice and develop relationship skills and learn about trust (Roesch-Marsh & Emond, 2021). Charlie's example also highlights the sense young people had that information would not be held and contained by the adult they had chosen to confide in but would be shared and result in actions being taken beyond their control. For this reason, friends were often regarded as a safer source of support.

Trust appeared to be further consolidated through the shared experience of being in care and the resultant insider knowledge. Young people indicated that having this shared bond transformed friendship, going beyond common interests and activities to encompass sharing advice and information, including legal and procedural knowledge (Mann-Feder, 2018; Rogers, 2017). Having a collective experience of care also contributed to a deep sense of empathy:

Not all kids in care, but most kids in care have went through family stuff, so you're kind of like them more, if that makes sense. (Amy)

When discussing friends and friends in care, there were differences in the words young people used. 'Relate to' was used often in the context of friends in care, indicating the value of having access to others with shared experience. Friends in care felt 'alike' to them, with 'things in common' and a deeper 'understanding' of them. Such terms were not employed in relation to friendship in general. Rather, when exploring friendships outside of care, young people's accounts focussed instead on key terms such as 'supportive', 'fun' and 'bully'. These terms could relate more to surface-level behaviours towards one another, rather than the deeper reciprocity of a shared history or identity (Hartup & Stevens, 1997). This suggests key differences for young people in how they see friends with care experience and those without:

(Speaking about her friend in care) The fact that like we could relate to each other, being able to, like, talking about not living with your ... your parents. (Beverley)

Kind of like they're there and they're supportive and they kind of like they understand, like especially if they're going through the same situation, it helps if they understand it and if they're there to talk to you, they're supportive. (Amy)

4.1.3 | Bullying

Relationships with young people in and out of care were not always positive experiences. Indeed, in discussions of friendships outside of care, young people spoke about bullying with the same frequency as they mentioned it being supportive. This may reflect wider research which suggests that children and young people in care are more likely

to suffer bullying than those not in care (Anti-bullying Alliance, 2022; Gilligan, 2007). Many described their care status as the focus of the abuse with the bully drawing on stereotypical, 'orphan' laden assumptions of why children are looked after:

When I was in like primary 5, there was this girl that bullied me. Obviously, I didn't take any of it. I was just like 'whatever'. But I remember she said to me, she was like 'why would people want to be friends with you when your own parents don't want you?' and oh my god that struck a nerve. I mean I didn't tell anybody I was in care after that for a long long long time. (Charlie)

It is of note that when discussing friends in care, bullying was not mentioned by any of the participants. This contrasts to earlier research which suggested that living with other unrelated children can lend itself to hierarchies forming and bullying (Barter, 2003).

4.2 | Barriers to friendship

As friendship is considered an essential need (Daniel & Wassell, 2002; Hartup, 1996), it was important to explore the barriers to friendship in care. This was particularly valuable data given the lack of research and understanding from the perspective of children and young people on the factors impacting on their opportunities to both make and sustain friendships (Negard et al., 2020). One of the barriers young people identified to making and keeping friends was a general lack of understanding of what it means to be in care. It appeared that this extended beyond peers in school and the community to include key adults (Dansey et al., 2019). Some of the participants shared memories of becoming looked after and the impact this had on their friendships:

It's a whole new concept. You have no idea what you get yourself in for ... and at that age, I think, as well, you've not, you've not got friends who are in care, because you've never been in care before. It's not really something that's on your radar. I feel like a lot of my friends didn't really understand what foster care was until they were maybe 14 ... yeah I think it has, something that needs to be taught more about. (Charlie)

A further barrier to making and keeping friends was the number and frequency of moves that the young people experienced (Children's Society, 2015; Happer et al., 2006; Marcus, 1991). Changes of school, home, communities and networks can result in children and young people losing friends when they move, friendships that may have been hard to make and sustain in the first place (Connolly, 2014; Felmlee et al., 2018; Schwartz & Spiro, 2017). As Beverley explains:

I like couldn't really keep friends, cos, cos I was just moving all the time ... Cos I've had so many moves ... I

just always have that feeling of like, that I'm gonna move on. (Beverley)

Significantly, participants also described the impact of other children and young people moving away and leaving them behind. So often, the focus in research has been on those leaving, but for participants, friendships in care had often ended due to being left behind in the care setting. Disruption to social supports appeared to occur even for those whose care arrangements were relatively stable and settled:

I have made a friend in care but it's always hard to keep up those friendships, especially if they move on and you are staying somewhere and then you also have your friends outside and then you're at different schools most of the time and it all just changes once either of you move on or whatnot. (Alana)

Despite many foster, residential and kinship homes offering care to more than one child or young person (The Fostering Network, 2016), little is known about the impact on them of other children moving on. For those left behind, this may be experienced as a loss of a sibling-like relationship (Mann-Feder, 2018). All of the participants had experienced friendships ending, impacting how they felt about, and managed current friendships.

4.3 | Peers in care

Young people shared their experiences of living with other children and young people in care. Often, such relationships were constructed as sibling-like and were rich with empathy for one another. Kin terms have been shown to be used in research on residential childcare (Kendrick, 2013), whilst sibling relationships indicate potential benefits in preventing antisocial behaviour, encouraging prosocial ones (Feinberg et al., 2013) and in emotional regulation (Stormshak et al., 2009). Young people argued that they ought to take on sibling-like roles in relation to those coming to live with them, both as a means of helping others cope with loss but also to reinforce that this was a new 'home' where family-like relationships could be expected:

Just making sure that if they have someone that they need to talk to, that I'm always there emm cos I'm closer in age to them. Just making sure that they have fun basically and they don't feel AS out of place cos I know they all have like maybe siblings or whatnot emm and they all miss their siblings and everything, so I just feel like if they had someone that they saw as like a kind of sibling figure, they'd feel a bit more at home ... it just comes natural. Sister initiative basically takes over! (Alana)

Several participants recalled their experiences of learning from older teenagers when they had moved into a foster home, skills that

they in turn passed on. One example of this was offered by Savannah, who described having been a 'picky eater' and being encouraged to try new foods in her foster home by the other young people living there. She now takes on this role with other children who have since spent time in her foster home.

I was addicted to sausages. I would never eat anything else'cept from sausages and then the boys who were here, they were getting me into some different foods. (Savannah)

The skills imparted by participants to new children in their foster homes extended to games and play. They valued proficiency in play and wanted to share this with others. Savannah discussed the routine in her foster home of playing board games as an ice breaker for new children and young people, with the carers and those staying there already:

We can play board games ... emm we play cards and that's like a new thing for me, how to make friends, like we just play board games when we first meet them like before we settle in we'll just play board games and cards and Jenga. (Savannah)

All the participants spoke warmly about the fun they had with peers in care. Anecdotes took on a powerful sibling-like narrative, of children together, sharing experiences and bonding through not just the experience itself but the shared memories of special moments. Several participants told funny stories about their foster siblings. For example, Callan described being out when his two younger foster siblings first arrived and their confusion about him being the family pet, then the fun they had together when they first met:

Well it was funny cos Sophie thought I was the dog cos I was at my auntie's, she thought I was getting a haircut or something, so we were, it was fun cos when she came we had a pool up and all that, so it was kinda fun. (Laughing) (Callan)

Without exception, each of the participants spoke with great empathy about their peers in care. Arguably, this compassion for others and the ability to relate to shared experience promote self-compassion, which has important benefits to mental health and self-esteem (Gilbert & Procter, 2006). This empathy was particularly acute at the point of entering care for the first time. Callan, aged 14, spoke about his younger foster siblings moving into his home and the fear and uncertainty he expected them to feel, as he had felt:

I think they could have been a wee bit scared and all that, cos that's how I felt as well. It's more nervous when you move into a house cos you are like 'is this a good home or a rubbish home'. (Callan)

Young people expressed how alienating and lonely coming into care could have felt without the support and compassion from the other young people living with them. Charlie moved into her foster home in difficult circumstances, with complex dynamics involving the young person already there. It seemed that little attention had been paid to this when she moved, social workers possibly dismissing the importance of relationships between young people (Mann-Feder, 2018). This lack of peer support was isolating for her:

Nobody showed me the ropes of that household ... I was like a duck, just hatched, you know when they follow their mum, everywhere around the house. I would just follow everyone ... You just want to know that you're not alone in this scenario ... I was just living in somebody else's world. But if the older person in my home, that I lived in was a bit more emotionally available, then I think I would have felt differently ... I would have had somebody to speak to and somebody to sort of discuss it with. Because it's not real until you talk about it, and I didn't talk about it, so it was never real. (Charlie)

4.4 | Peer mentoring in care

Whilst not referring to themselves as a mentor, most participants described supporting younger children living with them. Commonly, such relationships between children are not recognized in social work processes, but these naturally occurring relationships hold great significance to children, possibly impacting how they frame and understand their relationships with others (Children's Society, 2015). There were a few participants who mentioned having a mentor in school or church, who had helped with homework and been someone independent to talk to. There was a sense of being able to speak openly with mentors and feeling listened to in a non-judgemental way.

He helped me with my work quite a lot. And eh that's about it, helped me with my work, we had a few laughs. (Callan)

Research indicates that looked after young people prefer mentors to be care experienced and close to their own age (Stubbs et al., 2023). The participants in this study felt it was important for the mentee to feel reassured about being in care and confident that the mentor had an understanding of what it involves. Amy used the analogy of peer mentoring in a school context:

If you're mentoring someone, you like, you know what it's like, it's like you know what that person's first day is like ... You don't just want to go somewhere and like have no idea, like if you just show up somewhere and like no one's there to help you through it. You don't want to be like there like what am I doing here, what do

I do? And it's like having that structure. It's like knowing what to do and not just like sitting and waiting. (Amy)

Young people felt that it was important for those coming into care to have help to understand their experience and the reasons for being accommodated. This appeared to reflect their own experiences and the lack of information and support that they were given (Hammond et al., 2021). Participants regarded peer mentors as offering gentle encouragement and advice pitched at their level:

Just someone around that type of age that can like give advice on growing up through primary school or high school or whatnot and just like struggles with friends or family or relationships ... Just someone to like say 'this is correct, this is not correct'. Emm give you like a little push into doing something to take you out of your comfort zone, but like not too much. But just to make sure you're OK. (Alana)

I like to think that she quite liked me (laughs). Like she'd always come in my room and talk to me and all that and I used to like help her with her homework and stuff sometimes, so I think, I think she did get more help, like whenever I was helping her I think she became more able to do her work and all that I think. (Cara)

Being of similar age brought a sense of expertise and insider knowledge not shared by adults. Hearing the views of others of the same age had greater resonance (Pilcher, 1995). Relationships with others of the same age were seen as fundamentally different for the young people. They were entirely voluntary unlike many of their other support relationships which were with adults who they saw as paid to be with them (Emond, 2012).

Cos I'm closer to their age, and I know what it's like to be their age in like this era, basically. I know what it's like to deal with school at a young age and growing up in like the 2000s ... (the foster carer) has knowledge of an adult and I have knowledge as a child. (Alana)

4.4.1 | Benefits of peer mentoring

Young people felt that peer mentoring could bring stability and reassurance to others during what they regarded as a distressing experience.

A sense of stability ... have a bit more fun and ease into a placement better, cos they know someone's there ... I'd like to think that's how they feel, like at ease, at peace kind of, because it can be stressful and upsetting when you come here or just move anywhere in fact. (Alana)

Participants saw dependence on other young people as a positive, stability being a key factor looked after young people identified as critical to their success (Happer et al., 2006). The concept of bringing others greater stability echoes existing research on the value of creating stronger horizontal relationships for young people in care, in order to better support with transitions (Life Changes Trust, 2019; Negard et al., 2020). Participants gave examples of helping others and described the benefits of doing so, including a sense of feeling 'good and helpful'. This challenges how many of the young people may have grown to see themselves as a problem to others, creating a more positive self-view (Benard, 1990; Fuchs et al., 2020).

Like I just like being able to help, you know, it just makes me feel better myself, and then they feel better for being able to do it. (Cara)

It's always good to focus on a child, but also make sure that you're making, like keeping care of yourself, which is very important to do. So at the same time it may be difficult, it's also kind of easy once you get the hang of it. Just like once you're in the roll of it, you're just like 'OK, new kid, this is fab, let's do this'. (Alana)

Social work practice in peer mentoring is rudimentary. The quotes above highlight how important it is to include young people in creating any such programmes, as young people demonstrated significant insight into the needs of others and themselves (Life Changes Trust, 2019). Research with young people emphasizes the success of peer-led initiatives in peer support, which can improve young people's engagement (Mann-Feder, 2018; Turner, 1999) in services and activities. Participants spoke at length about the benefits of supportive peer relationships in care, and all endorsed the concept of peer mentoring as a support for young people in care, particularly at the point of admission, which research identifies as a particularly vulnerable point (Coman et al., 2016):

So like definitely going into care would, it would be a good thing to have that in place for people who are just going into care. (Charlie)

5 | DISCUSSION

This small-scale study has highlighted the centrality of children as a social support system for those in looked after care. It goes some way to shift the focus from peers in care as a 'risk' to instead recognizing the potential that children have as supports to one another. Whilst not all of the relationships the young people reported were positive, they all saw value in having opportunities to develop and maintain these naturally occurring relationships. Interestingly, this paper has shown the ways in which the child offering the support also benefits from these actions; being an active part of a social support system as

well as the recipient of one appears to have significant positive outcomes for those involved.

As represented in existing work in this field, participants overwhelmingly valued the support of other young people in care (Negard et al., 2020; Rogers, 2017), indicating that young people can care deeply about one another, can see each other as sibling-like and have the potential to offer significant support. This can contribute to a sense of stability and security for the cared for and good and helpful feelings for the carer. By contrast, those without the support of peers in care described feelings of loneliness and isolation, as well as a sense of stigma and exclusion.

Current UK policy emphasizes young people's participation in decision-making. A number of writers have called for far greater emphasis on young people's views and experiences, stressing that 'what matters' to the young person should be central to any planning or actions (Lundy, 2018; Thomas & Percy-Smith, 2010). This study shows that young people experience consideration and recognition of their friendships and relationships with other children as marginal to professionals' decisions about their lives. The role of peers as a social support system was not recognized by the adults involved with these young people. This was most stark in relation to young people leaving care.

Whilst there continues to be a focus on independence and the need to support this as a transition to adulthood, identifying paid professional agencies as key social support systems, there is an increasing body of research which supports the need for 'interdependence' at this stage of life. This approach encourages young people to positively rely on supportive, horizontal relationships with friends and young people they have lived with in care (Snow & Mann-Feder, 2013; Stubbs et al., 2023). Our study contributes to this emerging field. It indicates that friendships and peer relationships should be considered in social work assessment and planning for children and young people, in order to both recognize their strengths and to better harness existing support from friends. This is perhaps most acute when changes in where children are living have to happen. Attention needs to be given by adults to either supporting such endings or in maintaining friendships (Philip & Spratt, 2007). Young people moving not only affects their social support system but also impacts those children left behind. Little is known about what this means for those left behind and how this changes their experience of care.

Our findings promote and recognize the role that children can take in supporting others in care. Examples of this in practice may be carers and social workers actively supporting naturally occurring relationships between young people in care, praising and recognizing strengths related to friendship or caring skills; considering sibling-like relationships in planning for children and young people, especially when a move of home has to happen; or further developing peer mentoring programmes between young people in care. Indeed, following this study, the first author has been working in a Scottish local authority with care-experienced young people to develop such a programme, matching care-experienced young adult mentors to young people in care and supporting their mentoring relationship.

The research project on which this paper is based is not without limitations. It is small in scale, based in one local authority and therefore limits any generalizations that can be made from the data. The findings presented do not attempt to represent the views and experiences of all looked after children; however, they offer an exploratory account of an aspect of young people's lives which is often overlooked or located within an oversimplified risk paradigm. This study set out to explore the place of peer mentoring for children in care but revealed a much deeper and more naturally occurring set of relationships which were central to children's experiences of support.

Throughout the paper, we have discussed the different aspects of young people's relationships with peers and, through this, what constitutes a social support system. Young people described the variations between friends, bullies, supportive and sibling-like relationships where they live, in addition to young people at school, in communities and birth family siblings. The term peer relationship is not one generally used by young people and can diminish the deep and enduring feelings involved (Roesch-Marsh & Emond, 2021). However, we suggest that the relationships young people have with each other cannot be easily categorized and require further research in order to better understand and support young people with them.

6 | CONCLUSION

This research study aimed to contribute to knowledge and understanding of looked after young people's experiences of peer relationships whilst in looked after care. In doing so, it has highlighted the potential value of peer mentoring between children and young people in care as well as the importance of recognizing the benefits of children's social support systems for all involved. The findings support the recommendation of the Independent Care Review (Scottish Government, 2020a) for professionals to recognize and support the relationships that matter to children.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The authors would like to thank the children and young people who took part in this study for their thoughtful and deeply felt responses.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Anonymized data are available on request from the authors.

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How to cite this article: Irvine, S., & Emond, R. (2025). 'They feel like another child in care has their back': An exploration of peer support between looked after children in Scotland. *Child & Family Social Work*, 30(2), 178–188. <https://doi.org/10.1111/cfs.13084>