

Broaden definition of education for children in care to better support their development, study urges

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The education of care-experienced children should be redefined to include a much broader range of activities to better support their

development and success, a new study says.

Those who have been looked after perceive education in a much wider way than other [young people](#), including their [life experiences](#) and [social skills](#) not just exams, the research shows.

Regardless of their performance in school, those who took part in the study portrayed themselves as achievers in the context of this broader concept of education, and described being as proud of qualities such as independence, agency and capacity to strive for and achieve goals as much as being proud of [academic work](#). This means traditional measures of education are too narrow to be able to fully capture their experiences.

The study says there would be benefits for teachers, [social workers](#) and others to work more closely with children in care when making decisions, centering their lived experiences and drawing on their insights so as to achieve a better balance of support for both formal and informal educational opportunities.

The study recommends greater use of the "Conditions for Learning" model, which enables learning to be identified across the life of the young person. This could help to promote a positive view of education, giving opportunities to extend conversations beyond GCSE or A level performance while also allowing achievements in one area of learning to foster interest in the more formally measured educational arena.

The study, by Karen Kenny from the University of Exeter, is published in the journal *Adoption and Fostering*.

Dr. Kenny interviewed seven individuals who were or had been in care and were aged 11 to 59 and were living in the UK's South West. In total, 30 unstructured interviews were conducted, lasting between 141 and 349 minutes.

Dr. Kenny said, "This study counters a mostly negative discourse because it suggests that people who have been in care are surprisingly positive in their comments about learning, growth and development—it just so happens that these have occurred outside of formal education. In other words, previous definitions are too narrow to capture the life lessons that those with care experience themselves report.

"This is not to undervalue traditional education, but to promote the celebration of all learning, both formal and informal. The framework helps us to identify the different areas of learning to support this new perspective.

For example, both 14-year-old Anne and 37-year-old Gary recalled punishments that had been meted out to them which they saw as advantageous to themselves. Neither could change the event, but they could change the way they viewed and responded to their situation. Susan refused to change school at age 13 and said she was proud she had forced care staff to find a placement that catered to her demands.

Dr. Kenny said, "By analyzing the narratives that children in care relate about thinking, doing and being, we can clearly see that their learning and development encompasses and is shaped by far more than what happens within formal school establishments. Especially since many caregivers cannot adequately support the [formal education](#) of the young people they look after, it is important to recognize the many other opportunities and influences available to individuals in the care experience—and to use this information to empower them to reframe their situations and proactively make informed decisions in pursuit of current and future goals.

"The participants did not limit their understanding of [education](#) to the narrow perspective of school qualifications attained; they narrated stories of learning across their whole life experience. Much of what they

talked about was unplanned endeavor."

More information: Karen Kenny, The educational experiences of children in care across five decades: A new perspective on the education of looked after children in the UK, *Adoption & Fostering* (2023). [DOI: 10.1177/03085759231157415](https://doi.org/10.1177/03085759231157415)

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