BRIEFING 2

Is care the answer?

Care is meant to keep children safe. Too often it moves them from one risk to another. What happens to children after removal, and what should happen instead.

Dr Charlotte Ritchie October 2026 England Reading time 10 minutes

Child Protection: A Public Health Approach · Briefing 2 · October 2026
Based on chapter 3 of *Child Protection – A Public Health Approach: Reducing the Numbers in Care* (2021), updated with 2025 figures.

Key points

- There is no evidence that taking children into care saves lives. It may save some; it may cut short the lives of others.
- Children in care go missing, are moved at short notice, are separated from brothers and sisters, and are often placed far from everyone they know.
- The abuse of children in care has been documented for eighty years, and too often covered up. Many of the staff caring for the most damaged children need no qualification when they start.
- For some children, especially those who come into care early, care does help. That is a reason to remove fewer children, more carefully, and to support their families, not a reason to remove more.
- Kinship care, properly funded, offers a way forward where a child cannot stay at home.

40%

of care leavers aged 19 to 21 were not in education, employment or training

DfE 2025

12,720

children went missing from their placement during 2024–25

DfE 2025

40%

at least this share of children in care lived outside their own council area, 31 March 2025

DfE 2025

1 The revolving door of risk

When young people leave care they face a sudden rush of stress: living alone, isolation, depression, anxiety, the risk of homelessness. Of the 38,440 care leavers aged 19 to 21 in England in 2025, 40% were not in education, employment or training, 1,050 were in custody, and 1,610 were out of work or study because of pregnancy or parenting.[1] Adults who spent time in care as children have a higher risk of death than those who did not.[2]

There is, then, no evidence that taking children into care saves lives. It may save some; it may cut short the lives of others. There is very little research at all on what removal does to the parents left behind, to their mental health or their lifespan. But it is clear that care does not simply remove risk. It adds new risks, for the child within it and for the next generation.

2 Abuse in care

When the headlines are not full of the tragic deaths of young children, they are full of accusations of abuse made by people who were once in care. Taken from their families, often moved away from the areas where they had family connections, and placed in children's homes with staff many of whom lacked even basic qualifications.

Little has changed. Care staff in a children's home in England can start work without any qualification; they have two years to gain the Level 3 Diploma in Residential Childcare.[3] This, although they are working with some of the most damaged and troubled children in the country. In Germany, frontline staff in children's homes are trained

graduates in social pedagogy, social work or childhood studies, and similar levels of qualification are common in Sweden and Norway. Highly qualified staff bring professionalism, stability and, arguably, less risk of abuse.

Police checks are made, but a check shows only whether a person has been caught. Many offenders have never been convicted, and convictions abroad are not necessarily recorded here.

A conspicuous feature of abuse in care is the way it has been covered up. The Jillings report into abuse in children's homes in North Wales was taken out of public circulation. In Rotherham, an inquiry estimated that 1,400 children had been sexually exploited, many of them on child protection plans or in care, and found that some residential units were "overwhelmed by the problem".[4] In Oxford, the men behind the abuse uncovered by Operation Bullfinch deliberately targeted children in care homes. Children placed in care because their parents were not deemed good enough were then abused under the care of a state that is just unable to parent.

3 Missing, moved and far from home

In the year to March 2025, 12,720 children went missing from their placements in England, between them 86,900 times. 8,210 went missing more than once.[5] In the author's experience, about half of those who go missing do so to see their families or their brothers and sisters. For children missing for a day or a few hours, it is all too easy to be groomed or exploited.

Placements end suddenly. In 2024–25, 6,260 foster placements ended because the carer asked for them to end: 3,420 for reasons other than the child's behaviour and 2,840 because of it.[6] What must that feel like for the child? Like a parcel.

On 31 March 2025, at least 40% of children in care, 32,820 children, were living outside their own council area, and 18,120 were more than 20 miles from home.[7] Social workers will have their reasons: a shortage of local carers, a belief that the family or community is a bad influence. But the result is that children lose the social ties that matter to all of us, and their relatives, mostly on low incomes, cannot afford to visit them, or with other children to look after, simply cannot.

Brothers and sisters are often taken into care together but placed apart, sometimes on the grounds that they are a bad influence on each other. Yet research shows again and again that keeping siblings together reduces moves, loneliness and offending. Family Rights Group found that half of all sibling groups in care had been split up. Parliament has now added brothers and sisters to the people a council must allow a child in care to have reasonable contact with.[8]

4 Why foster care is a flawed answer

There has always been a shortage of foster carers, and those who do step up are under no obligation to care for the child indefinitely. If they no longer want the child, if their circumstances change, if they want to move away, they can simply hand the child back. Parents, whether we like them or not, are permanent carers. They sometimes need support or guidance, and perhaps the material advantages that better-off parents have: au pairs, secure housing, education. But they are just as likely as any care system to keep a child safe, and in the process to keep the child within a context that is known.

In the 1960s Urie Bronfenbrenner showed that relationships, even between a parent and child, do not exist in a vacuum. They are embedded in community, society, economics and politics. However shabby our homes or our clothes, do they not smell of home? Children in care are moving all the time: new schools, different food, different manners, different rules. If they are fortunate, they learn to lie about their home circumstances and to make superficial friendships. Little wonder that, in turn, their own children, often born too early in their lives, go on to repeat the pattern.

Social workers judge parenting against outcomes such as being healthy, staying safe, enjoying and achieving. Yet care is linked with poorer health, an unsafe environment, constant change, poor school results, homelessness and offending. The irony is stark.

> Kinship care, properly funded, keeps a child within a known world. It should come first.

Where a child cannot live with their parents, the obvious answer is often their wider family: grandparents, aunts, uncles, family friends. Councils must already give preference to placing a looked-after child with a relative or friend approved as a foster carer.[9] Yet kinship carers are often left to struggle, with little money and little help. Our Guide 2: Kinship care sets out what families need.

5 When care does help

Not every child is harmed by care. A large study linking care and education records for young people taking GCSEs found that "care generally provides a protective factor, with early admission to care being associated with consistently better outcomes" than for other children in need.[10] For some children, removal is the right decision, and it helps.

That does not weaken the case made here. The children who do best are those who come into care early and stay settled, which is exactly what too many children do not get. It is a reason to remove fewer children, more carefully, with real support for families first, and to make care, when it is needed, stable, local and kind.

6 Two mothers

FROM THE AUTHOR'S CASEWORK

A 25-year-old EU national came into a local advice centre with her nine-month-old child and an outreach worker. She had worked in the UK for several years before giving birth. Her child had been the subject of a care order, possibly because of a violent ex-partner, but had been returned to her because she had no difficulties with parenting. She had been placed in a council flat with rent of more than £800 a month. Because of her immigration status and the time she had spent caring for her baby, she was entitled to no benefits except child benefit. The housing authority had offered her a home it knew she could not pay for. Her social worker was new and did not answer the phone. The easiest option would be to take the child back into foster care, perhaps seek adoption, and leave the mother to fend for herself on the streets.

Earlier that week, the author had visited another mother, a former heroin user, in hospital. She was about to be discharged onto the streets: she had been homeless since her six-week-old baby was taken into care. When her daughter was taken, she said, she "just lost it". She kept her daughter's photo in her wallet. A letter telling her that her daughter had now been adopted had precipitated an overdose.

It is time to break the cycle, to learn from other countries, and to develop a social care system for families that really works.

7 What should change

1. **A qualified, professional care workforce**
   Staff in children's homes trained to graduate level in social pedagogy or social work, as in Germany and the Nordic countries, before they work with children, and paid accordingly.

2. **Kinship first, and properly funded**
   Family and friends explored before strangers, with financial and practical support equal to fostering, everywhere in England.

3. **Keep children close and together**
   No child placed far from home or apart from brothers and sisters unless there is a clear reason, recorded and reviewed.

4 **Contact with parents as a right**

Regular contact with parents, even if supervised, unless a parent has been convicted of a serious offence against the child.

5 **Support for parents after removal**

Help with housing, addiction and mental health for parents whose children are in care, so that children can return and the next baby is not lost too.

Questions for discussion

Q1 Given that most abuse in children's homes has been committed by men, how can children in residential care best be protected?

Q2 Is there any justification for the current system of stranger foster care or children's homes?

Q3 Should parents always have a right to see their child reasonably regularly, even if supervised, unless convicted of a serious offence against them? What are the risks and benefits?

Sources

1. Department for Education (2025) *Children looked after in England including adoptions: 2025*, care leavers aged 19 to 21: activity and accommodation.
2. Murray, E.T. et al. (2020) Association of childhood out-of-home care status with all-cause mortality up to 42 years later. *BMC Public Health* 20, 735. England and Wales.
3. The Children's Homes (England) Regulations 2015 (SI 2015/541), regulation 32.
4. Jay, A. (2014) *Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Exploitation in Rotherham 1997–2013*. Rotherham Metropolitan Borough Council.
5. Department for Education (2025) *Children looked after in England including adoptions: 2025*, children who were missing from placement.
6. Department for Education (2025) *Children looked after in England including adoptions: 2025*, reason for placement change during the year, foster placements.
7. Department for Education (2025) *Children looked after in England including adoptions: 2025*, placement distance and locality.
8. Children's Wellbeing and Schools Act 2026, section 10 (amending section 34 of the Children Act 1989).
9. Children Act 1989, section 22C(7)(a).

10. Sebba, J. et al. (2015) *The educational progress of looked after children in England: linking care and educational data*. Rees Centre, University of Oxford and University of Bristol.

Photo

Dr Charlotte Ritchie is a former researcher at the University of Oxford and Deputy Director of its Centre for Research into Parenting and Children. She qualified as a social worker in 1997 and was a Senior Lecturer in Social Work at Oxford Brookes University. She is the author of *Child Protection – A Public Health Approach: Reducing the Numbers in Care*.

Child Protection: A Public Health Approach · Briefing 2 · October 2026 · Figures are for England unless stated.