

**Our take on alternative care:  
information, identity, voice, autonomy and independence**

We — Paige, Bennett and Tianna\* — are care experienced young people aged 19-20 living in supported accommodation in the West Midlands (UK) with our support worker Camryn. Francesca, a care-experienced adult, interviewed us about our experience of alternative care for ATD Fourth World. These are some of the things we want to say about: **information and identity; and about voice, autonomy and independence.**

***Information and Identity***

Growing up in alternative care, it was difficult to develop a sense of who we are because we needed to please so many people, and different people wanted different things from us.

“You’re trying to make everyone happy at the same time, but then it’s like you’re not being yourself; but if I am myself, you won’t be happy. Then I’ve got to deal with all this, so it’s much easier if I just be this way with you, be this way with you, be this way with you, then everyone’s happy.” (Paige)

“Personality switching: biggest thing I’ve learned. So while I was in the home, I was not that talkative. Then when I was in my family, I was really goofy. Then when I was out, I’m really polite. When I’m around friends, I can switch to how they are. Then when my carer found out I did that, she’s like, ‘that’s a bit weird, you shouldn’t do that’. And in my mind, I’m doing this because you forced me to do it, because you didn’t help me.” (Bennett)

We wanted to express who we were, but we quickly learnt that people didn’t really want that.

“Once I started to get a little bit more freedom, my room wasn’t as clean as it was, because I like it like this. But the second my carer walked into my room, that’s why I got kicked out, because my room was a mess. But that was how I liked it, so the second I showed myself, it was like okay we don’t want them.” (Bennett)

“I can’t be bothered. When she decorated, I just let her do the room as she wants to. Because now I’m just going to have to defend myself again.  
Because if I say I want a bright red, ‘why would you want that?’” (Paige)

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\* These are pseudonyms to protect the privacy of the young people.

We should have the right to know our own stories – it harms us when information is kept from us.

“[My sister told me] you can't go see your mum, because the court won't let you... Then I found out I had another brother and sister, but I only found out about them when they were about the same age that we went into care, because they were going into care. But they were allowed to still see my mum, when I wasn't. My mum ended up passing away, in 2019, so it was like for so long, the court told me I wasn't allowed to see her.

Now, I actually can't see her.” (Paige)

“They have the decency to tell you one thing—but then they don't tell you that you've got five other siblings, one who's like, 10 years older than you and the others are like 10 years younger. They're just very selective on what they tell you.” (Tianna)

Not having enough information about ourselves and our stories can make it difficult to know who we are – but getting new information can disrupt our sense of identity too.

“I feel they just try and shelter you from a lot, but they don't actually realise, they're sheltering you from *you* at the end of the day. I've been trying to build myself up, based on what I know. And then out of nowhere, when you feel like a person's old enough, then you want to say well actually, this, this, this, this and that happened. Then it's a bit like: well, the person who I was, that's not me then, because now you're telling me all of this,

I'm a different person.” (Paige)

“I've found out things that if I could have had known sooner rather than later, I would have changed. So it's one of those things where they need to be thorough when they're going to tell you something: of course drip feed it, but don't miss things out that could potentially be important.” (Tianna)

Social workers should also think carefully about what they tell us and when.

“The opinion I have is if an authority tells you: 'no, that's something you don't need to know at a certain age', then just leave it because you're only setting yourself up to get hurt, which is what I guess in a way I was ready for — but I wasn't because I only found out about all this crap last year. And I had just turned 20.

I found all this out on my 20th birthday, near enough.” (Tianna)

“You don't tell someone who you haven't seen for 20 odd years, 'oh yeah, by the way I was doing this whilst pregnant, and this person did to this to you whilst I wasn't there' and all that; that's not something you want to hear, you know, if it's something like that.

I'd rather have been told, sooner rather than later than having to deal with it now.” (Tianna)

Other people know who's in their family – we should have that right too.

“Growing up with a family home, from young, and then being told, 'wait, no, this isn't your family, your actual family is that your mum's a single mum, your dad is nowhere to be found, and the last name you have is not actually your dad's last name, it's someone else's last name'.” (Paige)

Social workers often assumed we couldn't handle information because we were young – but we were already handling really difficult things. We should have a right to know about ourselves.

“I don't think they really put so much effort into focusing on younger children, because they just go like, 'oh, they don't understand, they don't get it'. Growing up with my mum, I didn't see what everyone else saw, like the big issues, the big problem. Maybe if someone actually sat down and showed me all this stuff... But it took time for me to find it out on my own, kind of do my own research and stuff, and that brought me into sort of a dark place, because going through it by yourself, it's just not easy.” (Paige)

“I was just like, well, are we allowed to talk to them or anything like that? Because me and my little sister wanted to understand better, because our older sister was already in contact with our biological mum, and we asked if we could have contact with our mum to understand why she made the choices she made. And they were like 'no, you'd get upset' and all that crap so they basically made the choices for us, which annoyed me.” (Tianna)

If social workers don't tell us, other people might – and things can go really wrong for us if that happens.

“Basically growing up, I didn't actually register that I was in care until I was about, say like seven. When my sister said that she got a card from mum and I was like 'what do you mean, mum's in the kitchen', and she was like 'no, not that mum'.” (Paige)

“I was happy, I wasn't getting bullied and all that crap but then, as soon as I got told, my oldest sister went round the school we were in telling everyone 'oh my god, I was adopted'. You know, some people at the school understood it, some people didn't. So because she made that choice to tell everyone, me and my little sister would get bullied for it, and they'd say 'you don't have a real family'.” (Tianna)

### ***Voice, autonomy and independence***

Growing up in alternative care, we had a lot of responsibility but no autonomy or choice. Social workers thought they knew what was best for us – they rarely thought to ask us what

we wanted.

“It's kind of just like 'this is the best view, and you might not see it but this is how it's going to be, and you'll thank us later down the line'. That's it.” (Paige)

Children in alternative care aren't all the same – we need social workers to pay attention to us as individuals.

“I feel like it's all about treating everyone individually. You can't say, 'oh, we're not just going to tell you because we've had past experiences with someone who doesn't want to know', or 'we are going to tell you because we've had experiences with someone who did want to know'. It is about everyone being able to have their own experiences. Because just like me and Tianna: I would have preferred to have known, and Tianna would have preferred not to know. It's completely different, but it's all about sitting down, talking and finding that out. It's about knowing the person you're working with.” (Paige)

When life is structured around care plans and meetings, it feels like we are having to serve the system – the system doesn't care what we want, we just need to tick the social workers' boxes.

“I used to lie about loving karate. I'd said I didn't want to do it, and I got completely ignored. They're just like 'well, you do it, or we take this off you'. Just like, 'oh Jesus alright, I'll do it'. I was forced to do it or else... it got to the point where I got off the bus from coming home, and I'd walk around the same area for an hour, so I could skip karate, because I never liked doing it. You've got to stop forcing children, because it's ruining their personality and their identity. It's like dragging what they like away from them, and going 'no, that's bad'.” (Bennett)

“They say, 'You're great at it though'. But it doesn't matter how great I am. If I don't like it, I just don't like it. I'd come in late all the time, and they'd ask me 'why are you late all the time?' I'm just sick of this repetitive life that I have to live that pleases everyone else but me. I'm tired.”  
(Paige)

When we're in care we're not allowed any independence, but when we turn 18 suddenly independence is all our social workers care about.

“For me it was weird: my carers wanted me to stay, and my social worker just kept saying well, independence is important. Me and my carer we would argue sometimes but I just felt like she didn't want to support our relationship, she just wanted to be like 'okay, well, if you're not getting on, well, I think it's just time to go'. And then it was just like, yeah, she's probably right. And then I did, and it was just like, why did I leave? I wasn't ready, I'd had people telling me 'yeah, you're ready, do it, it's fine, it's not that difficult'. And then it happened and it was like: well, it is difficult.” (Paige)

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*This interview was carried out with support from the Coalition to End Child Poverty.*