

New research provides crucial insight into lives of children in care

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The findings from one of the most comprehensive long-term studies ever undertaken into children in care will be revealed at Queen's University Belfast today (Wednesday 11 September).

The Care Pathways and Outcomes Study is one of only a small number of studies worldwide that has taken a long-term comparative approach, providing vital information for practitioners. It followed a group of 374 children in care in Northern Ireland, over a 10 year period from 2000 to 2010.

The study's findings have been published in a book entitled Comparing long-term placements for [young children](#) in care. The book reports on the most recent phase of the study, which involved interviews with 77 children aged 9-14 and their parents or carers in adoption, foster care, on residence order or living with their birth parents.

Commending the research team, Health and Social Services Minister Edwin Poots, said: "As Minister with responsibility for children and young people who are in the care system, I want to be assured that the quality of care provided for them is of the highest standard; that we are offering them the best chance of permanence and stability; that they are being enabled and facilitated to take part in decisions about their care and that they are being afforded the same opportunities as children and young people outside the care system.

"I want to congratulate the research team at Queen's University for

undertaking this important study. It is vital that we carefully consider the key messages emanating from such research to inform future policy and determine best practice on how to meet the long term needs of children in care."

Dr Dominic McSherry, a Senior Research Fellow at the Institute of Child Care Research at Queen's School of Sociology, Social Policy and Social Work, is the book's lead author. He said: "This study reveals a number of crucial insights and patterns about the lives of young children in care. They are important signposts for the professionals involved in the sector, and for parents and guardians.

"For example, until now adoption was considered the gold standard in long-term care placements. One of our key findings, however, is that from the children's perspective, it doesn't appear to matter significantly what the placement is, be it fostering, adoption, kinship care, residence order or returning to birth parents. It is the longevity of placement that appears to be the most important factor in achieving positive outcomes for these children, so long as they enter long-term placements at an early age."

Findings included in the book, relating to the group of 9-14 year olds and their parents and carers, are:

- Within Northern Ireland, the Southern and Northern Health Trusts have the highest numbers of adoptions, the Western has the highest number of children in foster care and the South Eastern Trust, the highest levels of children returning home to their birth parents.
- Despite a positive level of openness between parents/carers and their children across placement types, adoptive parents and some foster and kinship carers found it difficult to talk to children about their birth families and past history. Birth parents also

- found it difficult to talk to their children about the past.
- Many adoptive parents highlighted a sense of being isolated after the adoption order, without access to a formalised support mechanism.
 - Eight of the 77 children interviewed had been diagnosed with Foetal Alcohol Syndrome (FAS), and 5 of these were in the adopted group.

The new book *Comparing long-term placements for young children in care* is funded by the Public Health Agency (PHA) in Northern Ireland. Professor Bernie Hannigan, Director of Health and Social Care Research and Development, a division of the PHA, said: "While this study provides a positive contribution to the experiences and outcomes of looked-after children, it also focuses on those areas which require significant attention from policy makers; service managers and practitioners. It provides an evidence base for decision making in relation to the health and wellbeing of young children being looked after."

The British Association for Adoption and fostering (BAAF) have published the book. Priscilla McLoughlin, Director of BAAF in Northern Ireland said: "BAAF is privileged to publish the *Care Pathways and Outcomes Study*. The study is hugely important because those who make decisions about looked-after children's long-term care need to understand how the children fare in each of the long-term care placements. It is also crucial in that it follows a group of children in Northern Ireland and takes account of how our unique demographic, social and structural issues. Its longitudinal nature is also important, providing an opportunity to consider the long-term implications of care options for children and for their parents and carers."

Comparing long-term placements for young [children](#) in care is priced £14.95 and is available from the British Association for Adoption and

Fostering.

Provided by Queen's University Belfast

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