

The Exercise of Choice by Children and Young People in the British Public Care System

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Abstract : Under article 12 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, which extends human rights in their application to those under the age of 18 years, children must be consulted 'in all matters affecting the child'. The Office of the Children's Commissioner for England is responsible for improving the welfare of children and young people by ensuring that their Convention rights are respected and realised and their views taken seriously. In 2014 the Children's Commissioner engaged a team of researchers at the Centre for Social Work, University of Nottingham to develop and roll out an online survey to gather information from children and young people about their exercise of choice within the public care system. Approximately 3,000 children responded to this survey, which comprised both closed and open-ended questions. SPSS was used to analyse the numerical data and a thematic analysis of textual data was conducted on answers to open-ended questions. Findings revealed that children exercised considerable choice over personal space and their spare time, but had much less choice in relation to contact with their birth families, where they lived, or the timings of moves from one placement into another. The majority of children described how they were supported to express their opinions and believed that these were taken seriously. However, a significant number reported problems and explained how specific behaviours by professionals and carers made it difficult for them to express their opinion or to feel that they had influenced decisions which affected them. In open-ended questions eliciting information about their experiences, children and young people were asked to describe how they could be better supported to make choices and what changes would assist for these to be better acknowledged and acted upon by professionals and carers. This paper concludes by presenting the ideas and suggestions of children and young people for improving the public care system in Britain in relation to their exercise of choice.

Keywords : children, choice, participation, public care

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