



# Understanding Everyday Lives: Learning from Young People in Care

## Who we are

Hélène Join-Lambert, from the University of Paris West Nanterre in France, spent a year working with the Centre for Innovation and Research in Childhood and Youth at the University of Sussex (CIRCY). She worked with Janet Boddy and Rachel Thomson, who are the directors of CIRCY.

## What we did

Between December 2013 and September 2014 Hélène interviewed 22 young people aged 14-20 who were living in care or had a long experience of care, and nine carers, in France and England. All together she carried out 74 interviews. Hélène asked young people to make pictures and maps, to take her to places, and to talk about what is important in their everyday lives.

## What is important in young people's everyday lives?

**Friends** are extremely important in young people's lives. Some have many friends, some have few, some seem to be worried about having none, but all talk a lot about friendships. Being able to make and to keep friends is a key aspect of everyday life for young people.

Many of the young people who participated have several places where they feel at **home**. It might be a place inside the house where you live. But it could also be the place where your mother, or birth family, live – or for some young people, the place where they meet with their mother. Sometimes a previous foster placement or residential home feels like 'home'.

All young people had their own **mobile phones** or tablets. These are important in everyday life for texting, socializing on Facebook, Twitter, Snapchat etc., making pictures and looking at them. For some young people, mobiles and tablets also provide an important way of keeping in touch with family, or with friends.

**Schools** were said to be crucial for two reasons. First, that's where most of the friends are, and second, that's where you get skills for the future. Most of the young people who took part had experienced changes of schools: *"I've been to quite a few schools as I've moved around, and so I've picked up, got a few friends from each."* But sometimes friends get lost when you change schools.

Birth **family** members – particularly mothers, sisters and brothers are part of most young people's everyday lives, whether they see them often or not. Two young people said they had no contact at all with their mothers. Others keep in touch either through calls, texts, and visits, or make them be part of their everyday life through pictures, gifts and so on.

## How does everyday life relate to future plans?

**Predictability of decisions** in everyday life is very important. This helps young people to make choices and have control in their future plans. For example, young people talked about knowing what they need to do in order to sleepover at a friend's, to buy a bike or a tablet, to be allowed to have a phone, as well as bigger decisions about their everyday lives - from things like contact with parents and siblings, or staying in the same placement until the age of 18, 21, or longer.

Young people learn some **everyday skills** like cleaning up their rooms, using their pocket money, using public transport. However – and even for older people that took part in the study – other skills such as buying food, cooking meals, or using the washing-machine were not an important part of everyday life in care.

School **achievement and orientation** is a key issue in everyday life: many young people have tutors to help them get better grades, they know which high school or college they will be attending in the next year, and some already have very precise plans for future jobs.

## Are there differences between France and England?

English young people have more **predictability** about decisions and are aware of their rights. Contact with **parents** appeared to be more restricted in many cases, although this was not true for everyone.

French young people talk more about their **parents** as part of everyday life or 'everyday thoughts'. Some of the French young people have to share their **bedrooms**, and they have no TV in their rooms.

## What are the key lessons?

Everyday life for the young people who took part in the study is very **similar** in some ways to the everyday life of young people who are not in care: Young people use social media like Facebook, technologies like mobile phones, they value friendships, recognise the importance of school (even if they don't always enjoy it!), and have dreams for the future, of jobs, families or children.

But everyday life in care can be very **different** from the everyday life of young people who are not in care. Making and keeping **friends** is really challenging when you have to change schools. Young people who took part in the study were out of their home a lot: everyday life includes a lot of **moving** between places like different homes and to friends.

Most young people in both countries saw being in care as a **positive opportunity**, even though not being able to live with their parents could be hard to accept: *"I'd rather be safe and unhappy than happy and not safe."*