

Beyond the Glass Jar

Stop watching and come stand beside us

"I'm literally juggling the same things as any other parent, the only difference is that I was in foster care and didn't have a great childhood. But a lot of people didn't have a great childhood.

I think we're all trying our best, everyone's trying their best, everyone's got struggles and being treated differently makes it worse. It's almost like you're putting us in a **glass jar** and tapping on the glass. Like wow, look at that one. You know?"

(Care Leaver Parent)



A Good Practice Guide co-designed by the Essex Children in Care Council:
Building relationships with care leavers as they become parents

Contents:

Practice principles.....	Page 2
Practice that works.....	Page 3
Building trusted relationships.....	Page 4
Conversation starters.....	Page 6
Myth-busting.....	Page 7
Co-designing decisions and plans.....	Page 8
Navigating concerns together.....	Page 10
Using trauma informed language.....	Page 12
Our Pledge.....	Page 13

Practice Principles



1. Connection, not assessment

Care leavers repeatedly describe feeling “watched”, “judged” or “set up to fail”

2. Be predictable and reliable

Most care leavers have experienced disrupted relationships and many feel “let down”

3. Expect fear and proactively reduce it

Care leavers often fear that professionals will remove their child, because of their own lived experience of coming into care

4. See strengths, not stereotypes

Care leavers often describe feeling judged as a parent, however they have many strengths such as resilience

5. Co-produce decisions

Autonomy is especially important for people who may feel they have rarely been given control over their own lives

6. Build a safe culture for mistakes

All new parents will make mistakes, but care leavers often carry a lot of fear about how mistakes are viewed

Practice that Works

Connection, not assessment

Professionals should demonstrate connection before evaluation:

- ☐ Demonstrate warmth, curiosity and empathy
- ☐ Explain clearly *why* you are involved and *how* you can help
- ☐ Be consistent in tone and behaviour
- ☐ Avoid beginning interactions with checklists, risk questions or deficit language
- ☐ Avoid professional jargon without explanation

Be predictable and reliable

Many care leavers have histories of disrupted relationships and adults “who didn’t stay”. Many feel “let down”:

- ☐ Keep appointments, cancel only if absolutely necessary
- ☐ Follow through on small promises
- ☐ Give plenty of notice for meetings
- ☐ Develop good practice for ‘handing over’ staff changes

Expect fear and proactively reduce it

Care leavers often fear professionals will remove their baby, even when support is offered. This fear can silence them or make them avoid help:

- Normalise support seeking (“Every new parent needs help”)
- Be explicit about thresholds and processes
- Be clear about what is and what isn’t a child protection concern

See strengths, not stereotypes

Care leavers can be discriminated against because of society’s judgements, explore their many strengths:

- High resilience
- Deep commitment to giving their child “the childhood I never had”
- A desire to break the cycle of care
- Strong insight into trauma and attachment

Co-produce decisions

Autonomy is especially important for people who have rarely been given control over their own lives:

- Involve parents in designing support plans
- Offer choices
- Ask what has worked for them before

Build a safe culture for mistakes

New parents will make mistakes and care leavers worry that these will be misinterpreted. Create a culture where:

- Mistakes are learning opportunities
- Asking for help is praised
- Support is framed as “part of normal parenting”, not monitoring

Building trusted relationships



Show you care about them as a person

Care leavers repeatedly describe feeling reduced to a “case”. They say that trust grows when professionals show *genuine* interest in them as people, not just parents being assessed.

- ☐ Talk about everyday life
- ☐ Remember details (birthdays, names, interests)
- ☐ Ask about emotional wellbeing

Be transparent - always

Care leavers are clear that nothing damages trust faster than surprises, unexplained decisions or the feeling that things are happening “behind their back”.

- ☐ Be honest, even when it’s difficult
- ☐ Communicate meetings coming up or professionals to be involved
- ☐ Be clear in explaining why something is happening

Be human and be known

Care leavers have told us that it’s hard to build trust with someone you don’t know. They are expected to open up their lives to professionals whilst knowing nothing about the person sitting in front of them.

- ☐ Share small appropriate information about yourself; your likes, interests and hobbies
- ☐ What’s important to you in your work and why you care
- ☐ Be open about how you work, what matters to you and what young people can expect from you

Model positive parenting

Many care-experienced young parents say they have had few chances to see good parenting modelled, either growing up or in professional settings. They welcome gentle, everyday examples of how nurturing relationships can look.

- ☐ Speak warmly and encouragingly to their child in front of them
- ☐ Demonstrate patience, empathy and calm problem solving
- ☐ Acknowledge their efforts and strengths as parents
- ☐ Show how to play, soothe or engage with their child in a natural way

“It felt like my past was being used against me. Like because I didn’t have a family environment growing up, I couldn’t create one now.” (Care leaver parent)

Avoid assumptions about their history

Care leavers frequently feel that professionals assume the worst and assume they will struggle. These assumptions can feel stigmatising and disempowering. Don't assume:

- ☐ They didn't have positive relationships in their childhood
- ☐ They will repeat patterns they experienced
- ☐ They understand the role of social care and social workers
- ☐ They will understand parenting assessment processes
- ☐ They know what support is available

Provide practical help

Care-experienced parents say that small, practical support feels more meaningful than professional advice delivered from a distance. Reducing stress often improves parenting more than any written plan. Some examples of practical help:

- ☐ Showing how to sterilise bottles
- ☐ Supporting benefits applications
- ☐ Supporting them to attend parenting groups
- ☐ Helping with budgeting plans and managing money

Consistency

Every change in worker can bring back memories of instability. Changes often feel like rejection or punishment, and care leavers may often blame themselves for workers leaving. When changes are unavoidable:

- ☐ Plan warm handovers
- ☐ Allow joint sessions
- ☐ Be clear that support will continue
- ☐ Be honest about the reason for changes

Celebrate progress

Care leavers feel that professionals sometimes look for risk instead of looking for growth. Being seen positively helps them believe they can succeed. Care leavers say confidence can be increased when workers:

- ☐ Name their strengths
- ☐ Recognise improvements ("you handled that really calmly")
- ☐ Celebrate milestones

"Not all my issues are because I'm a care leaver. Sometimes I just need help with normal parenting stuff." (Care leaver parent)

Conversation starters



Getting to know them

“What do you enjoy most about becoming or being a parent?”

“What would you like me to understand about you?”

“What feels most important to your family right now?”

“What kind of support feels helpful – and what doesn’t?”

“Who shows up for you and your child in small ways?”

“Where do you feel most comfortable with your child and why?”

Understanding fears

“Have you had experiences with professionals that you want to avoid repeating?”

“What worries you most about services being involved?”

“What helps you feel safe with professionals?”

Normalising support

“Every new parent needs help. What kind of help feels right for you?”

“Asking for help doesn’t mean anything is wrong – it shows you’re doing your best.”

Working together

“How can we work together in a way that feels respectful to you?”

“What’s one thing I can do to make our time together more comfortable?”

Empowering choice

“What time of day works best for you for us to meet?”

“Shall we think together about what support plan feels right for you?”

Myth busting



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Myth:

“Care leavers parent the way they were parented.”

Reality:

Many care leavers are highly motivated to parent differently and to do so successfully.

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Myth:

“Care leavers are more likely to have their children removed.”

Reality:

Many care experienced parents provide safe, loving homes. What increases risk is lack of support, not their history.

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Myth:

“If they ask for help, it means they’re struggling.”

Reality:

Asking for help is a sign of strength and should be encouraged.

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Myth:

“If a parent was in care, professionals need to monitor more closely.”

Reality:

Support should be proportionate to current needs, not historical status.

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Myth:

“They don’t want to engage, they’re avoiding responsibility.”

Reality:

Avoidance is often a trauma response to fear of losing their child.

Co-designing decisions



A tool for sharing decisions and planning support with care leaver parents:

This framework is designed to be completed *with* the young parent, not by you for them. It is a conversation, not an assessment. Each steps ensures decisions are shaped by the young parent's goals, strengths, networks and preferences. With professionals supporting, not directing, the process. It creates shared power, safety through transparency, a clearer sense of choice and control, and trust.

1. What are our shared goals for you and your baby? Start by inviting the parent to name what matters most to them right now. Professionals can add what they also hope to support, but only after listening first. This ensures the plan is co-led by the parent, not by the system.

2. What strengths, skills and joy is already here? Care experienced parents often feel their strengths go unnoticed, because professionals focus on risk. Naming strengths openly helps balance the relationships, reduce fear and build trust.

3. What feels difficult or overwhelming right now? This is an invitation to talk, not an assessment. Young parents say they often hide difficulties because they fear being judged. Use trauma-informed language.

Co-production questions:

- ☐ “What is most important to you at this stage of parenting?”
- ☐ “What would you love to feel more confident about?”
- ☐ “What would feeling supported look like for you?”

Co-production questions:

- ☐ “What are you most proud of in your parenting?”
- ☐ “What’s going well that you want to keep building on?”
- ☐ “What moments with your child mean the most to you?”

Co-production questions:

- ☐ “What feels heavy at the moment?”
- ☐ “Is there anything that would make life a little easier?”
- ☐ “What’s getting in the way of feeling how want you feel?”

4. What support would feel most helpful to you? Care leaver parents consistently say they want a say in what support for them and their child looks like. This helps promote autonomy.

Co-production questions:

- ☐ “What type of support feels good for you?”
- ☐ “What support doesn’t feel helpful or comfortable?”
- ☐ “Who do you want involved in this plan?”

5. How can we support in a safe and respectful way? Care experienced parents emphasise that how support is offered is as important as what support is offered.

Co-production questions:

- ☐ “What’s the best way for us to work together?”
- ☐ “What helps you feel safe and respected in terms of support?”
- ☐ “How often would you like us to check in?”
- ☐ “What would make this process more manageable for you?”

6. Who is in your support network? Many care leavers describe feeling isolated, these strength based questions gently explore real relationships and lived experience.

Co-production questions:

- ☐ “Who shows up for you in small but important ways?”
- ☐ “Who makes you feel calm or grounded?”
- ☐ “Where do you feel you and your child belong?”
- ☐ “Is there anyone you want to be more involved?”

7. What shall we decide together today and what happens next? End meetings by co-creating next steps together.

Co-production questions:

- ☐ “Does this plan feel fair and doable to you?”
- ☐ “What would you like us to prioritise?”
- ☐ “Do our timescales feel realistic?”
- ☐ “How will we know that this plan is working for you?”

“I felt scared to say I was struggling, in case they’d call social and take my kids off me. I needed support, not fear”. (Care leaver parent)

Navigating concerns together



A practical 5 step tool to navigate concerns together:

Care experienced parents often say that the most frightening part of working with professionals is *when concerns arise*. This can be the moment when trust is lost. This trauma informed approach guides you step-by-step on how to raise concerns with a parent, not at them.

1. Prepare yourself before you speak. Care experienced parents sometimes feel professionals appear rushed or stressed. A calm worker helps the parent stay calm too. Ground yourself, slow down, clarify the facts, notice your own anxiety and explore any biases you may have.

Try saying:

- ☐ “I want us to talk about this in a way that feels fair and not scary”
- ☐ “I’m going to go through this slowly to give us both time and space to think”

2. Start with strengths and care. Care leaver parents describe how starting with concerns can make them shut down. Before introducing any concerns, begin by affirming what you have noticed they are doing well and how much they care for their child.

Try saying:

- ☐ “Before we talk about anything else, I want to recognise how much effort you’ve been putting in”
- ☐ “I can see how much you care for your child”
- ☐ “This conversation isn’t about blame, it’s about us working together”

3. Explain the concern clearly and kindly, without blame. Be specific about what you are seeing, what this might mean for their child and explain you want to talk about this now, before it becomes something bigger.

Try saying:

- ☐ “There’s something I’d like us to look at together”
- ☐ “Can I tell you what I’m worried about and then you can tell me how it feels for you”
- ☐ “I want us to think about how we can make things easier or safer moving forwards”

4. Explore the parent's perspective. This step is essential. Care leaver parents often feel they don't get a chance to explain and that assumptions are hurtful. Make space for their story, their experience of the situation, what they hoped or intended, and what support they think might help.

Try saying:

- ☐ "How did this moment feel for you"
- ☐ "What was going through your mind"
- ☐ "Is there anything happening that I might not know about or understand"
- ☐ "What might help here"

5. Co-create a plan. The plan should feel like something you produce together, not something imposed. Explore what the parent thinks will help, strengths they can build on, who can help and what both of you can look out for.

Try saying:

- ☐ "What would make this feel easier for you"
- ☐ "Let's think about the small steps that feel doable"
- ☐ "Here's what I can do. What can you do?"
- ☐ "Let's agree how we'll check in on this"

"The Gentle Check In":

Follow up and check in suggestions.

- ☐ "I just wanted to check in on how things are since we last talked"
- ☐ "What's feeling better? What's still feeling hard?"
- ☐ "Have our ideas been helpful? Should we change anything?"
- ☐ "Thank you for open with me on this. I know that's not always easy"
- ☐ "You're doing more than you think you are"

"Be honest and upfront, and be mindful of your language." (Care leaver parent)

Trauma informed Language



How to speak and write in ways that reduce fear, build trust, and support emotional safety.

Care-experienced parents often talk about language as one of the biggest signals of how a professional sees them. Certain phrases can unintentionally echo past experiences of being judged, moved, monitored or “in trouble.”

Instead of...

“Why didn’t you do this?”

“You need to...”

“This is concerning.”

“You should have...”

Try...

“What got in the way?”

“Would it help if we tried...”

“Let’s look at this together.”

“Next time, we can try...”

“I’m dealing with childhood trauma I didn’t even recognise until I became a parent.” (Care leaver parent)

“It only takes one good professional for everything to feel different.” (Care leaver parent)

“Workers who actually enjoy working with us – you can feel it. A quick message or someone keeping their promise means a lot.” (Care leaver parent)

We care about you

To all children in our care and care leavers: this is our pledge to you

You are important and we want you to feel cared about. Our job is to look after you and we can do that better by listening to what you have to say.

The Essex Pledge is a set of promises from Essex County Council to children looked after and to care leavers. Children and young people helped to write the Pledge and each year they get to have a say about what is important to them and whether the promises need to change. We will do our very best to make this pledge work for you when we make decisions and plans for you, your care and your future.

We promise:

- 1 To do everything we can to make you feel cared about, valued and respected as an individual
- 2 To do our very best to keep you safe, healthy and well
- 3 To make sure you have a social worker or personal adviser who will spend time with you and get to know you
- 4 To do our best to help you keep in touch with your family, brothers and sisters, and friends when you come into care
- 5 To make sure you have opportunities to achieve and succeed
- 6 To fully involve you in decision making so your views are listened to and to explain when we have to make a decision that you may not like or agree with
- 7 To help you become independent



This information is issued by:

Children and Families

Contact us:

Involvement@essex.gov.uk

Children and Families

Essex County Council

County Hall, Chelmsford

Essex CM1 1QH

www.essex.gov.uk

<https://cicc.essex.gov.uk>

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