

IN FOCUS

A constant GRIEVING

At a recent conference, BASW chair **Guy Shennan** saw three mothers give presentations about having children taken into care. They wanted social workers to hear their stories – so he interviewed two of them

Karen was subject to a care order and lived with her gran. She was 18 when she became pregnant. Her daughter Dawn was taken into care aged 16 months.

Children's services became involved with Helen when her elder son was almost three years old. She was in a relationship that was abusive, which led to her elder son going into care, after which she became pregnant with her second son.

Both Karen and Helen were supported by Brandon Reach, a service for parents under 25 who have had children removed from their care.

**All names have been changed to protect identities.*

What were your hopes before becoming a parent?

Karen: I was looking forward to being able to do things differently than how I was brought up – being close with my child and also having discipline. I had no boundaries and didn't want that for my child.

Helen: I knew at some point I'd want to have children but I had my son very young, so it was a bit of a shock to me. I dreamed of this perfect life – get married, have children, a nice big house, a dog and a garden and everything was going to be great. I didn't want my child to have the life I had.

As soon as I found out I was pregnant I started getting books and went online for information and advice. I was determined to do well. Even though I was pregnant very young, I carried on studying and completed my GCSEs.

I wanted to go to college and university and to work. Becoming pregnant actually motivated me, because I had someone else who was going to rely on me. So I felt I had to step up and move forward and become the best person I could possibly be.

What was your experience of social work like?

Karen: I was nine months pregnant and was having to go to meetings and it was almost impossible. I wasn't sleeping and pregnancy made me feel ill. My immune system was down and running from meeting to meeting was not easy.

Becoming a parent was different than I expected. I found it hard to bond with her, because I felt like she was going to be taken away and it would be better to keep a distance.



That made it harder to be the parent I wanted to be. Then being moved into the assessment units and not being able to see my family and get the support that I'd had – that made it really hard too.

I felt there was a lot of pressure and I was in a constant state of panic trying to keep up with everything because I knew that children get taken away. It made me feel quite depressed and anxious.

Helen: They would always ask me things when he [her abusive partner] was in the room, or we were in meetings together, so I was very cautious about what I did and didn't say. I feel like if I had been able to trust the social worker, it could have been very different. I always felt like she was going behind my back and writing other things, so that's where transparency comes in.

'I found it hard to bond with my daughter – I felt she was going to be taken away'

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'I have no idea who they're becoming'

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How did you feel when your child was taken into care?

Helen: I got stuck in a very dark hole and I couldn't see a way out. I just wanted to die. I couldn't get past the fact that your children are going to grow and one day they're going to be... My solicitor stopped contacting me, the social worker stopped contacting and even my therapy stopped at the same time. I'd managed to get out of that negative relationship, I'd managed to move out of the area. That was difficult as well, because I was moving on my own.

Sometimes I feel like it would be easier if my children actually died, rather than being removed, because they're out in this world. I have no idea who they are, who they're becoming and I'm not part of their life. I'm grieving, it's constant grieving, you're always going through it and it's not like you can go to a grave and know that that's where your kids are. Any time you think of them you know they're out there and it just makes it so much harder.

Karen: It's one of the hardest things to ever admit to but I think that almost everyone I've spoken to has said that and I feel like that as well. It's hard.

Helen: I don't wish for a second my child had died, but sometimes the pain, that pain... I just feel like, when you lose someone you know, they've gone, whereas we've lost our children but they're not gone, they're going to become adults who we would not have ever expected them to be.

What would have helped?

Karen: They should initially ask parents, what type of parent do they want to be and then help them achieve that, because I'm sure no one is going to turn round and say: "I don't care, I want to be disruptive". Social workers should consider that every parent has different styles rather than just sticking to strict guidelines of how parenting should be.

Helen: Social workers should get to know someone on an individual basis, because my response is going to be very different to someone else's who's in that relationship [with an abusive partner].

If someone had said to me: "You are going to lose your children if you do not open your mouth," I would have opened my mouth! I get it, it's hard for them, because saying that to someone, it's not the easiest of things, but you need to know what the process is and what is going to happen next... because I never knew anything.

In their reports, they should have said: "This is what you need to do to change this recommendation." Nothing like that was ever done.



What about support after your children were taken into care?

Helen: Social workers should make sure the person they've been working with is okay. Don't just cut off all communication because your part's done. Make sure if you're not in a position to continue that contact and support there's someone there to do it. There are places they could signpost people to and recommend.

Brandon Reach saved my life. To be able to speak to someone that believes in you and everything you're saying and gives you that space to be open and honest, and to be who you are inside, is huge. It's quite rare to find somewhere that you're not judged and not stereotyped.

Karen: It's like working with real people, not just someone who sits there and says: "How do you feel about that?"

It's someone who cares and has feelings towards us, which is really helpful and makes it easier to speak.

It's not like you're speaking to a professional, sitting there making notes.

Looking ahead...

Karen: I hope that when she's old enough that if she does want to contact me that I can show her I've always tried my best to involve her even though she's not there. Collecting birthday presents for her and going to as many meetings as I can. I'm also sorting out my life to prove to her that it shouldn't have turned out the way it did.

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