



Understanding the Barriers:

What does the data tell us about the persistent inequalities in educational and social outcomes for children in care?

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Key questions and considerations.



1. What does the data tell us?

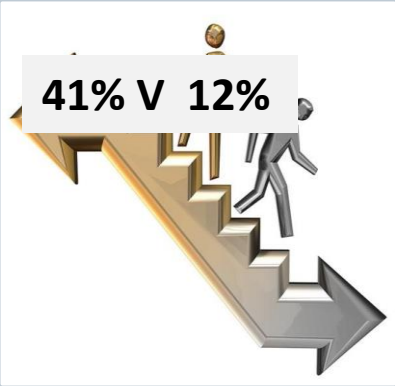
2. Why do children enter the care system?

3. What are the educational and social barriers faced by children in care?

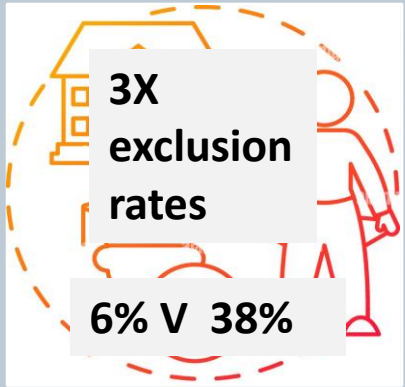
4. How might we create a more equitable learning experience for children in care?

5. How might we offer a more inclusive and responsive education and reduce the persistent inequalities for children who have experienced the care system?

1. What does the data tell us?



Looked after children and young people are among the most vulnerable groups in society and are statistically less likely to achieve their potential than other children.



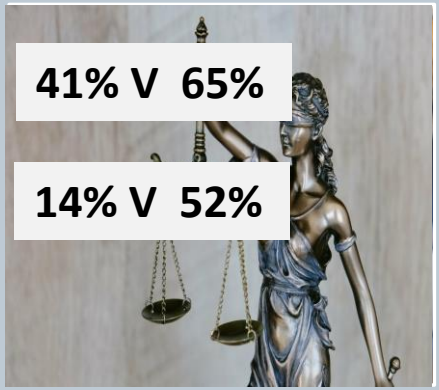
Children in care are among the lowest attaining groups, They are more likely to experience school moves, exclusion, and reduced access to post-16 education



Children in care are more likely to experience mental health challenges and have poorer access to consistent healthcare



Children in care are significantly overrepresented in the youth justice system



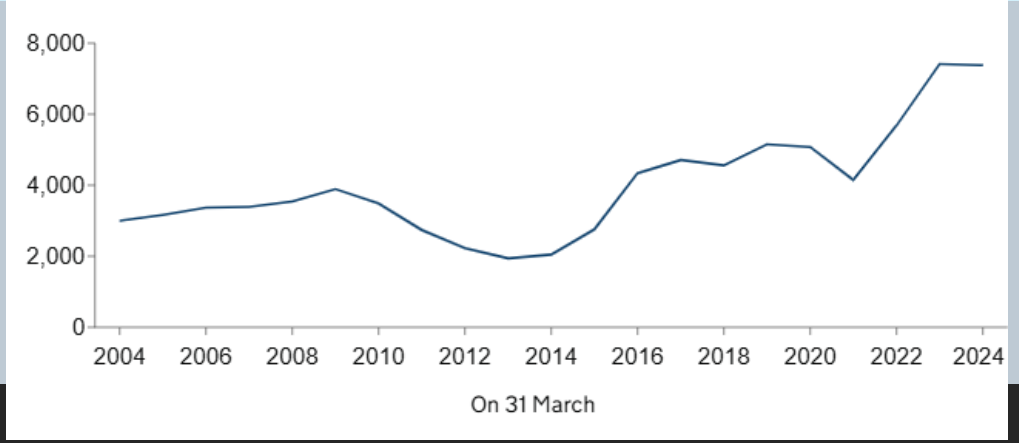
At Key Stage 4 care-experienced children underperform across all attainment measures.

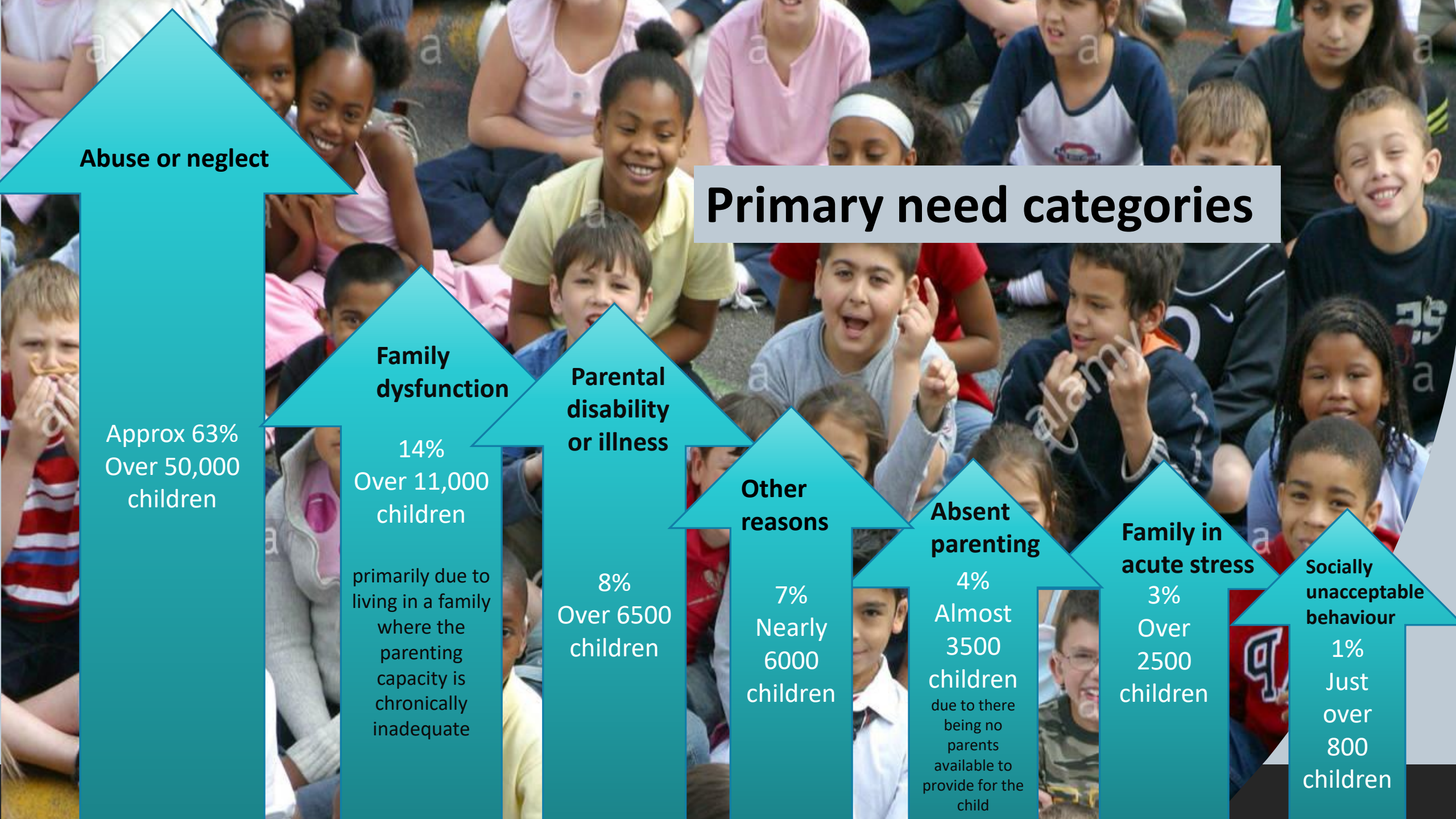


2. Why do children enter the care system?

Number of children looked after on 31st March 2024 was 83,630

Including 7,380 UASC





Primary need categories

Abuse or neglect

Approx 63%
Over 50,000 children

Family dysfunction

14%
Over 11,000 children

primarily due to living in a family where the parenting capacity is chronically inadequate

Parental disability or illness

8%
Over 6500 children

Other reasons

7%
Nearly 6000 children

Absent parenting

4%
Almost 3500 children

due to there being no parents available to provide for the child

Family in acute stress

3%
Over 2500 children

Socially unacceptable behaviour

1%
Just over 800 children

3. What are the educational and social barriers faced by children in care?

4. How might we create a more equitable learning experience for children in care?

5. How might we offer a more inclusive and responsive education and reduce the persistent inequalities for children who have experienced the care system?



Approx 63%
Over 50,000 of looked after children are in the care system due to abuse and neglect.

Abuse and neglect destroys a child's development of trust in their world, their sense of safety and control, the way they think about themselves, their self-esteem, their ability to explore and experience the world in a safe way.

A child who survives trauma can miss some of their developmental milestones, when they experience abuse and/or neglect they may also "go back" or regress in their development.

When a child is physically, emotionally, sexually or verbally abused, they may not trust their primary caregivers and may feel unsafe around them.

Social, emotional and Mental Health difficulties SEMH

Around 40–50% of children in care have a diagnosable mental health condition, compared to just 12–17% of children in the general population. This stark disparity highlights the urgent need for trauma-informed support and systemic reform.



The SEND Code of Practice 2015 mentions mental health 36 times.

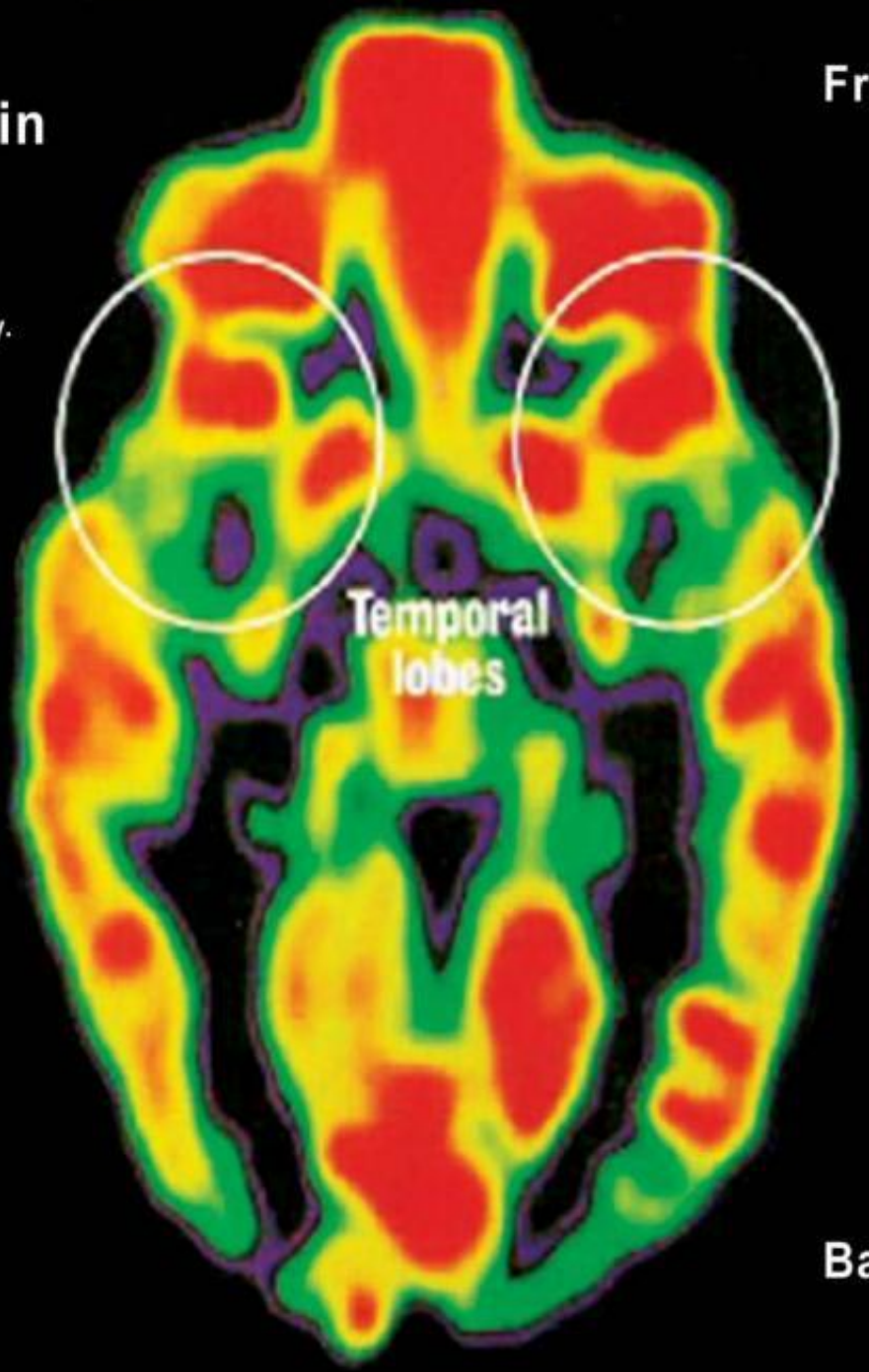
Mental health is now categorised as a special need:

5.32 Special educational provision should be matched to the child's identified SEN. Children's SEN are generally thought of in the following four broad areas of need and support

- communication and interaction
- cognition and learning
- social, emotional and mental health
- sensory and/or physical needs

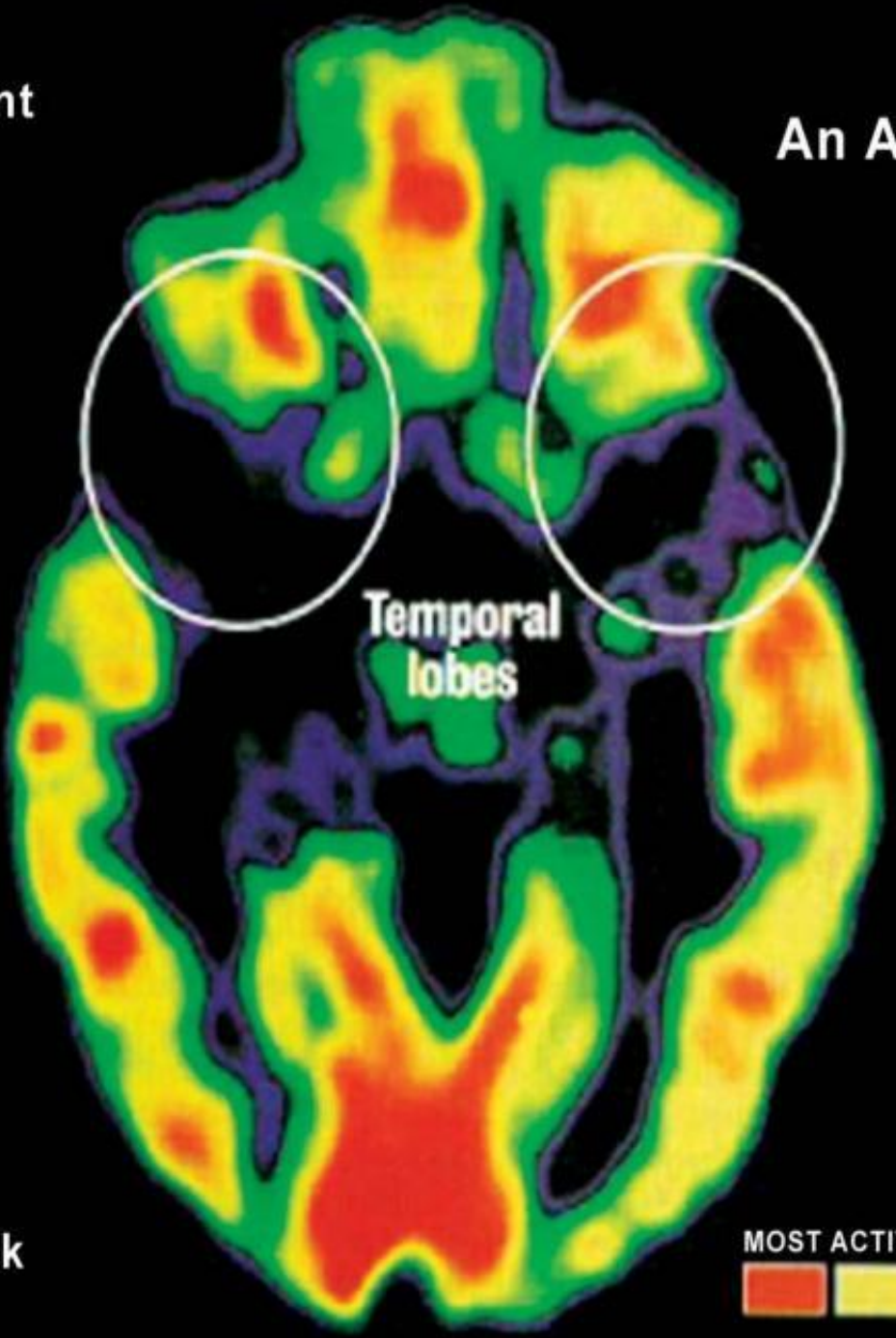
Healthy Brain

This PET scan of the brain of a normal child shows regions of high (red) and low (blue and black) activity. At birth, only primitive structures such as the brain stem (center) are fully functional; in regions like the temporal lobes (top), early childhood experiences wire the circuits.



An Abused Brain

This PET scan of the brain of a Romanian Orphan, who was instutionlized shortly after birth, shows the effect of extreme deprivation in infancy. The temporal lobes (top),which regulate emotions and receive input from the senses, are nearly quiescent. Such children suffer emotional and cognitive problems.



How might we support children in care and reduce the attainment gap?

Train staff in attachment and trauma awareness to understand behavioural and emotional responses.
Prioritise trauma-informed practice, relational approaches, and targeted academic support
Prioritise consistent relationships named adults, key workers, or mentors who offer stability.
Avoid punitive behaviour policies that disproportionately affect care-experienced children.

Appoint a Designated Teacher for Looked After Children to oversee progress and coordinate support.
Promote a culture of high expectations and belonging, avoiding deficit narratives.
Include care-experienced voices in school policy and curriculum design.

Support transitions between schools and phases with tailored plans and visits.
Offer life skills programmes—financial literacy, self-advocacy, and career guidance.
Encourage post-16 aspirations, including FE, apprenticeships, and university access
Reduce exclusions through restorative approaches and flexible pathways.

Work closely with Virtual School Heads, social workers, and carers to align goals.



Children in care (looked after children): statistics briefing | NSPCC Learning

The education background of looked-after children who interact with the criminal justice system - Office for National Statistics

Children with care experience – HM Inspectorate of Probation

Outcomes for children in need, including children looked after by local authorities in England, Reporting year 2024 - Explore education statistics - GOV.UK

HTTP://WWW.CREATIVEFUTURESUK.COM/#!LOOKED-AFTER-CHILDREN/C23L4

Annual Report 2025 - Education Policy Institute

https://natcen.ac.uk/news/new-report-reveals-long-term-outcomes-uk-care-experienced-children

A guide to looked after children statistics in England

New findings on how children in care interact with the criminal justice system | Children's Commissioner for England

Who are the children entering care in England? - Office for National Statistics

Related policies……

Children Act 1989
The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child 1989
UNCRC 1989
Every Child Matters: Change for Children 2003
Children Act 2004
Removing Barriers to achievement 2004
Childcare Act 2006
Policy for 0-19 year olds set out in the Government's 2007 Children's Plan.
The Apprenticeships, Skills, Children and Learning Act (2009)
Equality Act 2010
White Paper: Importance of Teaching 2010
Better Outcomes: Brighter Future Policy Framework 2014-2020
Promoting the education of looked-after children 2014
Children and Families Act 2014
Prevent Duty Guidance 2015
The National Strategy on Children and Young People's Participation in Decision-Making (DCYA, 2015),
SEND code of practice 2014 (UPDATED 2015)
Working together to safeguard children 2018.
First five: A Whole-of-Government Strategy for Babies, Young Children and their Families 2019-2028
The education of children living in children's homes Ofsted 2021

