

Children's identity

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Find out more about how you can support the children you look after to explore their identity

An introduction to children's identity in residential care

The children you look after will all be developing their own identity and have a right to support to develop a positive sense of themselves.

Each child is an individual; some will have what are known as 'protected characteristics' and it's against the law to discriminate against people with one of these characteristics.

You can read about the list of protected characteristics in the [The Equality Act 2010 \(Statutory Duties\) \(Wales\) Regulations 2011](#)

You should be aware of protected characteristics but remember that [human rights](#) are for everyone and aren't limited to this list.

You need to develop a working culture where you're open, receptive, and respectful to everyone.

For children or young people living in residential care this means you must take steps to:

- prevent discrimination: make sure the children you look after are not victimised because of their characteristics
- ensure equal opportunities: make sure that every child and young person in your home has rules and opportunities that are fair and comparable

- promote good relations between people who live in the home, including young people and workers: help others learn about children and their characteristics and build understanding between all the children you care for. Challenge young people and workers if you hear them using discriminatory language.

Having a positive approach to all children you care for

You should have a positive approach to all young people, regardless of which characteristics form their identities, including protected characteristics.

This is covered in Section One of the Code of Professional Practice for Social Care: Respect the views and wishes, and promote the rights and interests, of individuals and carers.

[Code of Professional Practice for Social Care Workers](#)

PDF 73KB

You should be aware of children and young people's individual characteristics and have the resources and training from your employer to support all who live in your home.

Your home may have an anti-bullying policy that will help you address any bullying. Speak to your manager if you're not sure how to meet your responsibilities around bullying.

Disabled Children

We have a separate page about [Working with disabled children](#).

LGBT+ young people who are looked after

We know that children living in residential care sometimes struggle with developing a positive sense of themselves, and this can be made even harder as they develop their gender or sexual identity.

Young people who are LGBT+ may face a range of issues around their identity. LGBT+ stands for 'lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, plus'. The '+/plus' includes all identities which aren't heterosexual or based on a male/female gender split. + is used because the list of identities and terms is evolving. Rather than memorising a list, be respectful and use the terms your young people prefer.

[LGBT Youth in Care](#) is a useful website for young people and professionals with advice, resources, rights and training

You may notice a young person seems low, has poor self-esteem and confidence, is self-harming, or other signs they're not themselves. If you talk to them about this, don't assume they identify as heterosexual and male / female. Check with them first, as it may be a [developing sense of their gender or sexual identity](#) that's causing them to feel upset. You should do this in a safe, private space and the young person should be able to trust you.

Explore sexual and gender identity in a positive way

Part of your job is to support young people to explore their sexual and gender identity in a positive and affirming way. Your home should provide relevant and up-to-date information so young people can explore issues in a way that's suitable for them.

You might discuss issues including:

- understanding identity
- LGBT+ support services
- talking to family and friends about their identity
- dealing with change positively
- challenging stereotypes
- addressing bullying.

Ensuring there's a safe space for young people's identities

In life we often reinforce gender and sexual identity stereotypes without thinking about it. Language is an important part of this, for example asking a teenage girl if she has a boyfriend (or vice versa). This can make it hard for them to say they're lesbian or gay.

Similarly, male and female toilets can send the message that a young person has to be male or female. A simple solution is to make toilets and bathrooms usable by anybody, where possible.

Another thing you could do to show you support young people with any gender or sexual identity is to look around your home and make sure there are positive images about LGBT+ people. Listen to what young people and workers are

saying about LGBT+ people and take steps to ensure the conversations are positive, challenging prejudices where necessary. This will help young people to understand they are in safe space where they can be themselves.

Using life journey work with young people

Life journey work is an approach you can use to help children recover from past experiences and move forward in their lives, for instance moving to a new home. It can also help them deal with their feelings about changes that have happened in the past.

You'll usually work with a social worker and child's parents, if appropriate, to research the child's past, for instance where they grew up or what they liked to do with their mum. This need to be done is a supportive and sensitive way and can help you feel empathy in your relationship with them.

Life journey work is an account of the child's life in the form of a book (paper or digital) with words, pictures and diagrams. However, best practice is to make sure life journey work is an ongoing conversation, which is appropriate to the [developmental level of the child](#) so their understanding of their life evolves and grows as they do. It's not a one-off event; the book opens to the door to conversations and questions, as needed.

The life journey book can include:

- where the child was born
- time of birth and weight
- [developmental milestones](#)
- likes and dislikes
- favourite memories

- details of parents, siblings and extended family members
- copies of birth certificates; these will provide concrete evidence of belonging
- a family tree to help the child to see where they belong in their family
- a life graph, which is a diagram to help the child understand home moves, maybe drawn by them
- photos and their own pictures.

You can also help the child to make a memory box to safely store important possessions chosen by the child. This can be used as a resource for maintaining a sense of identity.

Photographs, tickets to events, maps, brochures, achievements and awards are all part of the child's life journey and can be included in life journey work.

You should also include cultural information in the life journey book, to help your young person develop a sense of identity. We've seen how children need to develop an understanding of their religious, ethnic and cultural background and how you have a duty to ensure these needs are met, as outlined in [The Children Act 1989](#).

Furthermore, the [Adoption and Children Act 2002](#) states that children must be given full information about themselves and contact between birth family members promoted, where appropriate. Life journey work is a method for facilitating this and fulfils the child's need for knowing why separations have taken place and why certain adults are unable to take care of them.

As well as the past, life journey work also looks at the present and the future to help your young person think about themselves, what they want their future to look like and how they're going to achieve it.

You might want to discuss past and present events or memories (positive and negative) with the child and explore their hopes for the future through poems,

art activities, photographs, maps and transcribed interviews with family, friends, social workers and foster carers.

Useful resources

[Our work to support children who are looked after](#)

[Our chosen or 'curated' research about the number who are looked after](#)

You can find more ideas about how to help with children and young people who are developing their gender and sexual identities in the links below.

[Childline's YouTube channel has a number of videos about young people's identities, including celebrating cultural differences, body image, LGBT+, and bullying](#)

[LGBT Youth in Care](#)

[Trans Youth in Care: A Toolkit for Social Care Professionals](#)

[Supporting lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans young people: information for foster carers](#)

[The Proud Trust](#)

We want your feedback

Help us to improve the Residential child care worker resource by telling us what you think about it in our short [four question survey](#).