



THE UNIVERSITY *of* EDINBURGH

Edinburgh Research Explorer

The protective power of friendship, advocacy and activism

Citation for published version:

Roesch-Marsh, A, Roxburgh, M, Bartlett, T & Nicholas, D 2023, 'The protective power of friendship, advocacy and activism: A short report on the experiences of Who Cares? members and allies', *Child Abuse Review*. <https://doi.org/10.1002/car.2823>

Digital Object Identifier (DOI):

[10.1002/car.2823](https://doi.org/10.1002/car.2823)

Link:

[Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer](#)

Document Version:

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Published In:

Child Abuse Review

General rights

Copyright for the publications made accessible via the Edinburgh Research Explorer is retained by the author(s) and / or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing these publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

Take down policy

The University of Edinburgh has made every reasonable effort to ensure that Edinburgh Research Explorer content complies with UK legislation. If you believe that the public display of this file breaches copyright please contact openaccess@ed.ac.uk providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.



SHORT REPORT

The protective power of friendship, advocacy and activism: A short report on the experiences of Who Cares? members and allies

Autumn Roesch-Marsh¹ | Marissa Roxburgh² | Thomas Bartlett² | Donna Nicholas²

¹University of Edinburgh, UK

²Who Cares?, Scotland, UK

Correspondence

Dr Autumn Roesch-Marsh, MSW, PhD, SFHEA, Senior Lecturer in Social Work, Programme Director, PGR, Room 2.08, Chrystal Macmillan Building, 15A George Square, Edinburgh, EH8 9LD.
Email: a.roeschmarsh@ed.ac.uk

Abstract

Friendship is valued by most children and young people around the world. In research on happiness, it is often identified as an essential ingredient for a happy life. In this short report we go further by exploring the importance of friendship as an ingredient in advocacy and activism. The report is written by two care experienced young people and two adult allies. The report explores how friendship makes advocacy and activism more possible and more powerful. Drawing on our reflections and personal experiences we discuss how having a space to make friends with others who have care experience and allies, and working together to effect change around policy and practice, has a protective impact on those working for change and those they support. These friendships are protective in practical and emotional ways, but they are also protective because they help hope to grow. We argue that the protective power of friendship, advocacy and activism should be more widely recognised as an important function of advocacy organisations like Who Cares? Scotland.

KEYWORDS

advocacy, care experience, friendship, safeguarding

Key Practitioner Messages

- Participating in peer advocacy and activism as a care experienced person can enhance your sense of safety and offer protection from harm within the care system and within families and communities.
- Young people understand protection and safeguarding as being more than the absence of harm. Being safe is about being connected to people who really know, understand and care about you and that is why friends, peer advocates and fellow activists matter so much.
- Care experienced activism has a protective function for those who take part and for those they aim to help. It is about making things better for others now and in the future and feeling hopeful that others might not suffer in the way you did. It is about working towards a future where all care experienced young people feel safe, loved and understood.

INTRODUCTION

People who have an experience of the care system have often experienced neglect and abuse, both in their families and communities and also within the care system itself (Biehal et al., 2014; Cusworth et al., 2019; NSPCC, 2021). Who

This is an open access article under the terms of the [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/) License, which permits use and distribution in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited, the use is non-commercial and no modifications or adaptations are made.

© 2023 The Authors. *Child Abuse Review* published by Association of Child Protection Professionals and John Wiley & Sons Ltd.

Cares? Scotland (WC?S) is a national membership organisation for care experienced people which aims to transform the care system and advocate for the rights of children and young people to ensure that all those in care feel safe, respected, loved and a sense of belonging. In this short report, two WC?S members, a staff member who works with them and an academic who has researched alongside them discusses how participation in care experienced advocacy and activism groups can have a protective impact on those who take part. It can also create protection for other care experienced children and young people.

In order to write this report, we worked together over several months. We met twice, discussing the themes, with Autumn and Donna making notes. We also wrote individually to agreed prompts. Autumn then pulled together the report using all this material and shared it again with the team for comments and suggestions.

The report begins by providing a short discussion of advocacy and activism with and for care experienced people and the role of organisations like WC?S in this work. It discusses how organisations like this enable peer support, friendship and activism. It then goes on to look at the ways involvement with WC?S as a membership organisation can be a protective experience, making the link between friendship, activism and a sense of safety and belonging. The report concludes by suggesting that advocacy organisations like WC?S have a crucial role in facilitating friendship and creating safety, arguing that the protective aspects of this work should be more widely appreciated within social work and social care.

CARE EXPERIENCE, ADVOCACY AND ACTIVISM

As our group was working on this report we began searching for papers or books that tell the story of advocacy and activism among care experienced people in the UK. We discovered that this has not been a topic that many academics or historians have explored (Stein & Orford, 2011). However, organisations like WC?S, Coram Voice (England), Become (England), Voices from Care Cymru (Wales) and Voice of Young People in Care (NI) have all published some of this history on their websites. All of these organisations describe themselves as independent advocacy organisations whose purpose is to ensure that the voices of those with care experience are heard. Like most advocacy organisations, their origin stories describe times of disempowerment and marginalisation on the part of those with care experience and the coming together of those with lived experience and allies to respond to this injustice (Boylan & Dalrymple, 2011). Being part of this history was important to all of us and shapes what is written in this report.

Independent advocacy can take different forms but is often defined as ‘speaking up for children and young people and ensuring their views and wishes are heard and acted upon by decision makers’ (Department for Education & Skills, 2004, p. 8). Crucially, independent advocacy addresses power imbalances, ‘ensuring that an individual’s human rights are recognised, respected, and secured’ (Scottish Independent Advocacy Alliance (SIAA), 2022). At WC?S, independent advocates may be volunteers or paid members of staff, they may have care experience themselves or they may not but they will always have training in the key principles of advocacy. Building trusting relationships based on equality is at the heart of their approach to advocacy, they see this as essential to ensuring that young people will feel free to share their true feelings about things. Their goal is to ensure that through this process of engagement and support, children and young people can ‘claim their rights’.

Allied to this advocacy work, WC?S also provides a range of ongoing participation opportunities for those with care experience. This work includes things like providing corporate parenting training for those who work with care experienced children and young people, engaging with policymakers to improve entitlements and support for those with care experience, and awareness raising campaigns to challenge the stigma around being care experienced. In our discussions for this report, we identified that many of these participation activities can be understood as activism. When we discussed what we understood this to be, Marissa defined it best as ‘speaking up on issues that matter to you in order to make a difference’. We also talked about how being an activist was about getting information to the people who needed to be challenged by it; this included social workers and other practitioners, policymakers and politicians.

Although these external facing activities were valued by all of us, our discussions revealed that there were quieter or less visible aspects to activism which were important too. Our ideas around this are well expressed by the idea of ‘relational activism’, which Sara O’Shaughnessy and Emily Huddart Kennedy define as

... a long-term form of activism that utilises relationships among networks of like-minded individuals, and blurs the distinction between public and private-spheres by using daily behaviours as the locus for social and environmental change. (2010, p. 553)

Both Thomas and Marissa spoke about the friends made through their work at WC?S and the big impact these relationships had on them and others. In the next section we will explore the importance of friendship for care experienced advocates and activists and explore why and how these relationships might be understood as ‘protective’.

ACTIVISM, ADVOCACY AND SAFEGUARDING

There are many available definitions of child protection and child safeguarding from academic sources and policy documents across the world. For example, the NSPCC (2022) defines child protection as

... part of the safeguarding process. It focuses on protecting individual children identified as suffering or likely to suffer significant harm. This includes child protection procedures which detail how to respond to concerns about a child.

In this definition, safeguarding includes a whole range of actions ‘to promote the welfare of children and protect them from harm’, including things like protecting children from abuse or exploitation and taking action to enable good life outcomes (NSPCC, 2022).

We noted, however, that creating safety for those with care experience can be more complex. Care experienced children and young people are, in many ways, no different to other young people, they long for safety, love and belonging. However, being care experienced means that you may not have had many lasting experiences of safety or protection in your birth family or your community. Your lack of power in the care system can make you feel even more unsafe. We spoke in detail about the ways in which the care system can be unsafe when corporate parents are neglectful of their duties to provide continuity of care, stability and support to maintain important connections with families and friends. Concerns which were highlighted by thousands of young people consulted during the Independent Care Review (2020) in Scotland. The prevalence of such experiences make it all the more important that those with care experience have access to independent advocacy and participation opportunities.

This idea of protection being part of a much broader set of activities resonated with us as we began to think about what protection and safeguarding meant to us as care experienced people and their allies. It made sense to us that protection is not just about the absence of harm. Through our discussion we tried to think about the many ways that connecting with other care experienced activists and advocates at WC?S helped to create feelings of safety and fostered the conditions for safety to grow. Many ideas emerged. In trying to organise them we found Latimer et al.’s (2020) framework for thinking about peer relationships and safeguarding very helpful. They group the informal aspects of peer support under three headings: practical, emotional and both. We will explore our thoughts on these and add a fourth category around hope and building a better future, which speaks to how activism can be a protective activity.

Enhancing practical and emotional safety

Like the young people in Latimer et al.’s (2020) study, we felt that protection was about support, especially during emotionally challenging times and being kept safe from either emotional or physical pain. Being helped to keep safe is also a practical thing, helping someone find a new place to live or helping them decide who they might go to for further help and advice. Marissa spoke about how peer advocates and fellow activists in the care experienced community often had the best understanding about entitlements and how to navigate the social work bureaucracy because they had been through the system themselves and had an intimate understanding about how it worked.

These practical things are also about enabling emotions and we all felt that emotional safety was just as important as physical safety. Thomas explained to us how he associated protection with the feeling of happiness, and we explored this. Many children and young people experience intense unhappiness in care because of the hurt they have experienced in their families, but also because of the way they are treated in the care system and the lack of choices and power they have in the system. Thomas explained how this unhappiness can put people in danger, magnifying the demons in your own head and making it more likely that you harm yourself or take unnecessary risks.

At WC?S, the idea of the ‘care family’ is often referred to; this is the idea that the members of the organisation, both those with care experience and those who see themselves as allies, are working together to provide ‘a lifetime of equality, respect and love for care experienced people’. Marissa and Thomas both felt that acceptance from this ‘family’ and a sense of belonging as a member all contribute to a sense of safety. The idea of a ‘care family’ also captures the idea that creating safety requires a lifelong commitment, to feel truly safe you need to feel safe now but also have a sense that you will be safe in the future. Feeling you have a ‘care family’ who will always be there for you helps with this.

Marissa and Thomas spoke about how important it was that WC?S members, especially those with care experience, could provide for each other a deep level of understanding. Knowing that someone else has had some similar experiences means you do not have to explain everything all the time, they get why certain things might be harder or different for you because they have had to deal with this too. Being understood in this deep way by others with lived experience is also protective because it means you know there is a place you can go where people relate to you and this makes it easier to open up and share worries and seek help when things feel unsafe.

We discussed how care experienced friends made through WC?S and other care experienced networks are so important because they are friends you do not need to prove yourself with, you are able to be yourself. There was a feeling that these people do not judge and you can go to them for advice whenever you need it. Marissa explained how it feels good to be part of a community where you do not need to hide away if you are struggling. We discussed how this is extremely valuable because these people can understand without an explanation, they get it because they have had similar experiences.

Thomas summed up the protective power of friendships with care experienced activists and allies by saying, 'These friendships have offered me protection because I am happy when I am around them and I also feel safe. I feel it is a place where it is safe to express my thoughts and feelings and not be judged.'

The importance of trust and protection was also discussed, both being able to trust other members but also being able to trust yourself. Being trusted by others but also feeling they trust you as a fellow activist was encouraging and could make you feel better about yourself. Marissa spoke about how encouragement from friends at WC?S had helped keep her on the right track because she wanted to please the people who have invested in and cared for her.

Hope and building a better future

All of us were motivated in our work with the care experienced community by the idea that we could make a difference, that things could be better in the future for people with care experience. Our understanding of hope chimed with Schwartz et al.'s definition, putting '... intention, thought and action into making tomorrow's reality better than today's' (2007, p. 117). This hope for the future meant that we were willing to volunteer our time and juggle other commitments to be involved with this work. This could be particularly difficult when care experienced members were on limited incomes and juggling studies, work and family commitments, sometimes without a wider family safety net. Despite the challenges of participating in activism, we spoke about how being with and talking to others who were passionate about improving the care system helped our hope to grow. This is interesting as scholars have also identified how hope is often '... collective in nature, influenced by culture and developed by community and families' (Boddy et al., 2018, p. 588).

Activism as a WC?S member could include a whole spectrum of activities from public activities like taking part in a 'Love Rally' or talking directly to politicians and policymakers at events held by the Scottish Government, to more local activities such as providing corporate parenting training or participating in a local support group. Working together with other care experienced people and allies provided a sense of collective purpose and broke down barriers and hierarchies between volunteers, paid workers and researchers and helped friendships to grow.

The hope that this shared activism could help to generate was felt to be protective because of the way it inspired all of us to keep going. Hope gives back to those who work to help it grow, making them feel better about themselves and their lives and leading to a sense of what we could call existential safety. Existential safety is just a fancy way of saying 'I feel safe in the knowledge that my life has a positive meaning, that I can make a contribution to this world'. We also talked about how dealing with past trauma, disappointment and pain is easier if you believe you can do something to help make sure others do not suffer the way you did. It gives meaning to your suffering; it may have been hard but at least some good might come out of it if lessons can be learned and changes made.

CONCLUSION

Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child makes it clear that all children and young people should be listened to and taken seriously. Across the world, many organisations like WC?S are working to ensure that those with care experience have this right upheld and many of these organisations are run in partnership with those who have care experience. Such organisations also have a recognised safeguarding role in providing independent advocacy for children and young people who are too often overlooked or find it difficult for their voices to be heard in adult systems. However, the important activist role of these organisations is not always recognised as also being core to their safeguarding and protective functions. As we have tried to show in this reflective report, having the space to make friends with others who have care experience and allies and working together to effect change around policy and practice has a protective impact on those working for change. These friendships are protective in practical and emotional ways, but they are also protective because they help hope to grow. There are so many reasons why funding independent advocacy and activist organisations like WC?S matters. In reading this article we hope more people will understand that this work is also core to the kind of holistic safeguarding that is needed for those with care experience to have a deep and abiding sense of safety and the experience of happiness that can come from this.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

There is no conflict of interest for any of the authors.

Data sharing not applicable, no new data generated. This was not a research project but rather a reflection on past work together across a number of projects and activities so there was no research data generated.

ETHICS STATEMENT

This was not a research project so did not receive ethical approval. The co-authors had worked together on previous projects, and this is a reflection on their past learning.

ORCID

Autumn Roesch-Marsh  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7421-3418>

REFERENCES

- Biehal, N., Cusworth, L., Wade, J. & Clarke, S. (2014) *Keeping children safe: allegations concerning the abuse or neglect of children in care*. NSPCC. Available from: <https://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk/79854/1/Abuseincare.pdf> [Accessed 4th March 2022].
- Boddy, J., O'Leary, P., Tsui, M., Pak, C. & Wang, D. (2018) Inspiring hope through social work practice. *International Social Work*, 61(4), 587–599. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1177/0020872817706408>
- Boylan, J. & Dalrymple, J. (2011) Advocacy, social justice and Children's rights. *Practice*, 23(1), 19–30. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1080/09503153.2010.536212>
- Cusworth, L., Biehal, N., Whincup, H., Grant, M. & Hennessy, A. (2019) *Children looked after away from home aged five and under in Scotland: experiences, pathways and outcomes*. Available from: [Final Report - Outcomes Strand.pdf \(york.ac.uk\)](#) [Accessed 10th March 2022].
- Department for Education & Skills. (2004) *Get it sorted: providing effective advocacy Services for Children and Young People Making a compliant under the children act 1989*. London: Department for Education and Skills.
- Latimer, K., Elias, C.A. & Firmin, C. (2020) *Opportunities for peer safeguarding intervention: a briefing following fieldwork with safer London*. University of Bedfordshire Available from: [Latimer-and-Elias-Adams-with-Firmin-2020-Opportunities-for-peer-safeguarding-interventions.pdf \(csnetwork.org.uk\)](#) [Accessed 14th March 2022].
- NSPCC. (2021) Statistics briefing: Looked after children. Available from: [Statistics briefing: looked after children \(nspcc.org.uk\)](#) [Accessed 10th March 2022].
- NSPCC. (2022) Safeguarding and Child Protection. Available from: <https://learning.nspcc.org.uk/safeguarding-child-protection> [Accessed 10th March 2022].
- O'Shaughnessy, S. & Huddart Kennedy, E.H. (2010) Relational Activism: reimagining Women's environmental work as cultural change. *The Canadian Journal of Sociology/Cahiers Canadiens de Sociologie*, 35(4) 2010, 551–572.
- Schwartz, R.H., Tiamiyu, M.F. & Dwyer, D.J. (2007) Social worker Hope and perceived burnout. *Administration in Social Work*, 88(2), 273–281. Available from: https://doi.org/10.1300/J147v31n04_08
- Scottish Independent Advocacy Alliance (SIAA). (2022) 'What is Independent Advocacy'. Available from: <https://www.siaa.org.uk/what-is-independent-advocacy/> [Accessed 14th March 2022].
- Stein, M. & Orford, F. (2011) *Care less lives – the story of the rights movement of young people in care*. York: Catch22.

How to cite this article: Roesch-Marsh, A., Roxburgh, M., Bartlett, T. & Nicholas, D. (2023) The protective power of friendship, advocacy and activism: A short report on the experiences of Who Cares? members and allies. *Child Abuse Review*, e2823. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1002/car.2823>