

Fostering Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children and Young People

The UK has always been a destination of choice for people fleeing war and persecution and has a long history of welcoming and supporting families and children arriving here. Fostering an unaccompanied young person is one way of supporting children in crisis. They may arrive here alone and are often highly traumatised, with a high proportion suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder.

Who are Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children and Young People?

Every child who comes to the UK as an asylum seeker is an individual with their own story. However, research data provides the following information.

- They are more likely to be male than female. In England in 2018, 89% of the asylum seekers in care were male and 11% were female.
- They will probably be teenagers. The majority of asylum seeking children and young people in care are aged between 13 and 17, with a small percentage having arrived when they were as young as 8.
- Child asylum seekers come from around the world. The countries from which the majority came to the UK are Eritrea, Sudan, Vietnam, Albania, Afghanistan, Iran, Iraq, Syria, Ethiopia, and Libya.
- A child or young person is an asylum seeker if they have travelled to the UK to escape from danger in their own country, for example, war or a repressive regime.
- Many children and young people make this journey without their parents or other adults they know. If they arrive in the UK and there is no one they know to take responsibility for them, then they will become 'looked after' by a local authority. They will often be placed with approved foster carers when there is no suitable family member or guardian to care for them.
- Unlike fostering a child from the UK, very little may be known about asylum seeking children when they arrive. What we do know is that they will have experienced varying degrees of trauma prior to leaving their home country and often during their journey to the UK.



- If it is established that they have a well-founded fear of persecution, then they have the status of refugees. After they arrive in the UK, they must make an application to the Home Office.

Statistics nationally for the year to 30 Sep 2020 were as follows:

- 2,795 asylum applications from UASC (-30% on the previous year)
- The top countries of origin for UASC include Sudan (15%) and Afghanistan (15%) closely followed by Vietnam (14%), Iran (14%), Eritrea (12%), and Iraq (8%)
- The rate of initial decisions resulting in some form of leave for UASC was 71% (Refugee Status 95%, Humanitarian Protection 5%)
- 90% of all new UASC were male, a similar level to previous years.
- The Home Office has stopped providing an age breakdown of UASC arrivals but between 2009 and 2019 the average age profile of UASC arrivals was -
 - Under 14 – 6%
 - 14-15 years – 24%
 - 16-17 years – 61%
 - Unknown – 9%

Source: <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/immigration-statistics-year-ending-september-2020>

Reasons for Leaving Home Country

There are many reasons why a child or young person may feel that they are no longer safe in their home country. War, oppression, and civil unrest can create situations in which many children and young people may fear for their lives. Many children and young people who claim asylum have experienced significant trauma which forced them to flee from their home, including living through war; enforced conscription; imprisonment, and in some cases torture; being the victims of physical and/or sexual violence; witnessing violence to others and traumatic bereavement/s. Asylum seeking children and young people may have experienced persecution for their beliefs, or because of their ethnic or social group. Children and young people will often be very frightened for the people they left behind.

Journey to the UK

Many children and young people will have experienced further trauma as they undertook long, difficult, dangerous journeys where they may have been in confined spaces for long periods of time (e.g. in a shipping container). They may have taken perilous voyages across the sea and spent many hours fearing for their lives. They may have had limited access to essentials such as food, drink, and sanitary facilities for prolonged periods and may have developed physical and mental ill-health during the journey. Many children and young people will have witnessed other people falling ill, being arrested, or even dying. It is not uncommon for children and young people to become unintentionally separated from family or friends. Once in Europe many children and young people will have spent long weeks or months living in often squalid, dangerous conditions in camps or squats, vulnerable to sexual and physical abuse or exploitation.

Age Assessments

The age of an unaccompanied child is extremely important. It determines their access to education and support, effects the way in which their asylum claim is processed, and can even be a decisive factor in a claim for asylum.

Adult asylum seekers and families are entitled to support, including accommodation and essential living needs, from the Home Office. For children seeking asylum, however, support should be provided by the local authority in which they are physically present. This support includes help accessing education that is of an appropriate level, and again age is an important factor.

Age is central to identity, and the age assessment process can be very damaging for children and young people who are disbelieved. It is extremely important that age assessments are only carried out where there is significant reason to doubt the claimant's age.

Age determination is an inexact science, and the margin of error can sometimes be as much as five years on either side, especially around the time of puberty. There is no single reliable method for making precise estimates and no conclusive medical test. Age Assessments are usually carried out initially by the Home Office. Even if the Home Office is treating someone as an adult, if a referral is made to children's services, then the local authority must make their own decision as to the young person's age. The young person should be supported as a child whilst the assessment is being undertaken.

A local authority's age assessment must be as full and comprehensive as possible and conducted in a clear, transparent, and fair manner. Most age assessments should be completed within 28 days, however, the timescale for assessment should be responsive to the needs of the child or young person.

What are the Needs of Asylum Seeking Children and Young People?

To start with they have the same basic needs as any child coming into foster care - a loving home, education, health care, respect, and support for their identity. However, they may have additional, important needs including:

- They may have been traumatised by their experiences in their home country, or their journey to the UK may have been hazardous. Around half have been observed to show high levels of post-traumatic stress symptoms.
- They may speak little or no English and need support with learning the language.
- They may need help with adjusting to a way of life that is unfamiliar to them, for example, relationships between males and females in the home may occur differently in their home country.
- They may have regular appointments with an immigration legal professional who is assisting with their claim for asylum.
- Although they probably will not have any direct contact with their parents, they may be able to speak to them on the phone or using video calling platforms
- It may take time to build up trust before they can tell their story.
- They are a long way from their families and may feel isolated particularly if they are not near other members of their community or religious faith.
- They may need support in recognising and dealing with hostility to asylum seekers both from other young people and from adults in the community.
- They will be scared about their futures and scared for the loved ones they have left behind.

Fostering Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children and Young People

A foster carer's task is to support these young people in their recovery of resilience, self-esteem, and emotional spirit by creating a safe environment and helping them settle into their new community. They will need help to learn the language, the customs, and – most importantly – to feel that someone is there to protect them and advocate for them. Foster carers may also be required to support young people through the process of applying for permission to stay in the UK.

In some cases, foster carers may even need to prepare them to return to their own country. Many unaccompanied children seeking asylum will also have specific emotional, practical, language, and cultural needs that their foster carers will need to consider.

Foster carers looking after unaccompanied children will require support to offer them the stability and the help they need; fostering services must ensure that their foster carers are trained and supported to deal with the particular challenges of meeting the needs of unaccompanied children.



What can Foster Carers Do to Help?

Go at their pace

Children and young people may find it very hard to trust anyone and tell their story or just to be honest about how they feel now so go at their pace. Be a consistent and stable person in their lives who helps and supports them, and this will help build trust. The young person will be experiencing a range of negative emotions from fear and worry to guilt and it's important that carers understand this and that this is about their experiences not about the foster carer.

Help them find positive social roles

After-school activities such as sports, art, music, or religious groups provide opportunities to make friends. They also offer the chance for the young person to achieve success, build their self-esteem, and feel part of the community, which are vital to start the natural healing process.

Understand stories may change

There may be many reasons why young people may have been unable, to tell the truth, or their whole story when they first arrive, including the inability to trust adults, fear of endangering family or friends, and traumatic experiences. Try to maintain an attitude of open curiosity, rather than suspicion.

Support their education

Young people may not speak a great deal of English and have a disrupted history of education. Secondary school-aged children are entitled to 25 hours of education or training a week. Young people are sometimes offered 'English for Speakers of Other Languages' courses at colleges, but this may not immerse them in an English-speaking community in the same way as a school would do. You should be given support to find an appropriate school place with extra funding for language support - talk to the young person's social worker and the virtual head about appropriate school provision.

Maintain language and cultural identity

Language is part of who we are and young people need to maintain their own language as well as learn English. If they are refused asylum or leave to remain after they turn 18, they need to be able to settle back in their country of origin. Find out about local links to their culture, religion, and country of origin and try to put the young person in touch with these links and visiting with them will help them to maintain their identity and also feel more welcomed into your area.

Understand they will have experienced trauma

The exposure of UASC and refugee children to traumatic events will vary widely, although only a small number will have no direct experience of persecution or trauma.

Trauma has the potential to induce difficulties with mental health conditions such as anxiety and depression. Children and young people who have experienced war-related trauma and multiple related stressors have been found to be at risk of developing mental health difficulties. For instance, it is estimated that 40% of young refugees may have psychiatric disorders, mainly, depression, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and other anxiety-related difficulties.

The number and nature of traumatic events experienced in the country of origin are related to higher symptoms of PTSD, whereas the experiences and current stressors in the host country are linked to depressive symptoms.

Many of the children and young people needing foster carers will have suffered traumatic experiences, unimaginable to most. They may have witnessed the death, abduction, or torture of parents or other relatives. They may have been the victims of torture, violence, abuse, or trafficking. Understandably, they may have overwhelming feelings of loss, separation, or survivor's guilt.

Many foster carers and professionals start from the view that children and young people have extremely distressing but normal responses to the traumas they have faced. What's more, despite their young age, they also showed huge resilience in surviving their past experiences. Foster carers can help these children and young people to become more resilient and build their emotional strength to help them both now and in the future.

Signs of Distress or Trauma

The following signs, especially if they persist over time, could suggest that a child or young person may be struggling with the transition into the UK or with the trauma they have experienced.

- Ongoing physical health problems with no apparent cause
- Excessive nervousness or crying
- Mistrust or fear of others
- Prolonged sadness or grumpiness
- Fear and anxiety and hopelessness
- Thoughts about traumatic events that won't go away
- Avoidance of talking/thinking about particular subjects which may be linked to trauma
- Talking about a traumatic event in the present, as if it is happening now
- Problems managing behaviour, attention, or emotions



- Constantly tired or falling asleep in class might indicate that the child or young person is not sleeping well
- Lack of desire to play with others
- Withdrawal or retreating into own world
- Social isolation, bullying, lack of belonging to a peer group
- Some children and young people who have been victims of war, violence, torture, or other trauma may suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder. They may experience an increase in fear and anxiety or re-live the trauma, perhaps through bad dreams and nightmares. Some children and young people may also experience some of the symptoms connected to trauma but without an official diagnosis.

Health

Young people will need support to manage their health needs like any other young person but in addition, foster carers for these young people may need to be aware of the likelihood of:

- The effects of temporary or long-term malnutrition
- Physical injuries including torture, beatings, and war wounds
- Pregnancy including the possibility of this resulting from rape
- Sexual exploitation
- Female genital mutilation

Young people will need information and support on health care including nutrition, sexual advice and contraception, alcohol, smoking, and illegal substances.

Emotional Well Being and Mental Health

The assessment of emotional health, wellbeing, and mental health is complex. The circumstances of unaccompanied asylum seekers have been identified as unusually stressful resulting from a combination of the circumstances in the country of origin, the journey to the UK and arrival and settlement in the UK, and the possibility of a refusal and return to the country of origin. Many of the sources of stress are located outside of the young person including contact with the border agency, children's services, and other state services. However, the impact may be primarily felt inside the young person and manifested in the kinds of disorders identified.

Primary prevention will be core to addressing these issues including high-quality placements, establishing meaningful and long-lasting relationships with adults, establishing friendship networks, culturally relevant networks including those that meet religious, dietary, dress beliefs and needs.

Advice, advocacy, and links with community networks will also be significant. Contact with or information about family and friends in the country of origin may also be very important. It is essential, however, that this is driven through consultation and discussion with young people themselves. The assessment and provision of services for those that are suffering from clinically significant emotional distress and identifiable mental health problems will be important via access to Children Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) and other specialist mental health services.

Encourage the Natural Healing Process

Shock, disassociation, and trauma may lead to erratic behaviour. Children and young people may also carry survivor guilt and be scared for those who remain in their country of origin. Foster carers can help them find culturally appropriate ways of expressing loss and grief. Formal therapy can help, but there may be hurdles, such as developing trust and language difficulties.

The Rewards to Fostering Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children and Young People

Helping a child to find their feet in a new country and learn about a new way of life can be very rewarding. In turn, foster carers learn about the child or young person's home country and their lives back at home.

Children and young people can do very well once they settle into their new lives. Research has shown many do well at school and go on to university and make strong bonds with the families who foster them.

Working with Children and young people who are quiet, worried, and scared when they arrive to watch them become more outgoing, engaged, ambitious, and feel safe is a huge reward for Foster Carers.

Foster Carers for these children and young people need to get the right support so they can understand these children and young people's particular issues and meet all their needs. Training and support should be available from your Fostering Service.

Foster Care Insight

A couple who are foster carers and have cared for asylum seeking children share their insight into the challenges of the role and what has helped them:

"This brought its own challenges as we had to teach them a new way of life, their English was very limited or non-existent. Not only that, we had to learn and navigate through the Home Office legal system which has many obstacles that we had to work around and gain knowledge on...One thing we have learned over the years you need to have routines and boundaries in your household to function properly.

Once these are in place you are able to offer a stable, caring, and nurturing household. We have fostered children and young people from many backgrounds i.e. from Afghanistan, African, Jamaican, Romanian, and mixed parentage children, and young people. For us, learning and gaining knowledge on a child's and young person's ethnicity and religion helps us to be able to meet their needs inclusively."

Sources of Support and Information

Local Authorities have a responsibility to provide services and support to unaccompanied asylum-seeking and refugee children in their area under Section 20 (Children Act 1989) both during the age assessment period (up to 28 days) and once it has been concluded they are a child, until their 18th birthday - regardless of their route of entry or immigration status. In most cases, children should receive all support associated with being 'looked after' including suitable accommodation placement, a care plan, a personal education plan, access to health assessment and health care, support accessing legal advice, and an Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO) who will review the child's progress and ongoing support requirements.

The Refugee Council provides advice and advocacy service for Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking Children and Young People (UASCYP). They support UASCYP throughout the asylum process and can act as appropriate adults in an age assessment. The service has a national remit. See the Refugee Council website for more information about the service and how to make a referral. www.refugeecouncil.org.uk

Preparing for Transition

The approach of adulthood brings the likely consequences of the asylum process to the fore and can be a stressful time. Alongside the complex transitions made by other care leavers (from school to work, from care to independence), there is also the constant threat of forced removal. Local authorities have clear duties to help young people prepare and plan for adult life and to provide ongoing aftercare support while young people are in the UK. Foster carers have key roles in providing practical help, emotional support, and companionship to young people preparing for transition working in conjunction with the child's social worker their personal advisor, and other professionals. Most foster carers expect to continue to have a place in young people's lives once they had left. Consistent with wider leaving care research, this is more likely where young people were strongly integrated into the structure of the family, where things were going well, and where they exhibited few behavioural challenges.

Given the age profile of most unaccompanied asylum-seeking young people, they will quickly face the transition to leaving care services where what is made available to them will depend on their eligibility for a pathway plan under the Children (Leaving Care) Act 2000. In addition, their asylum application may well be re-visited depending on their status, especially those with discretionary leave. There may be, for some, a decision that includes a return to their country of origin. Any of these transitions may have an impact on health care assessment and planning including the continuation of existing treatments.

Interested in Fostering Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children and Young People?

People who wish to apply to foster an unaccompanied asylum-seeking child or young person should contact a fostering service in their local area; use Fosterline's service www.fosterline.info/thinking-of-fostering/find-a-fostering-service/ to locate a local fostering provider by providing your postcode. Prospective foster carers are subject to a full assessment of them, their family, and their home. Further details of the assessment process can be found here www.fosterline.info/thinking-of-fostering/how-do-i-become-a-foster-carer/

If you are a FosterTalk member and you would like any further advice or support, please contact us on 0121 758 5013 or email enquiries@fostertalk.org