



# HOW CAN WE ENSURE THAT CHILDREN IN OUR CARE SYSTEM GET THE BEST POSSIBLE START TO LIFE?

DR DOMINIC MCSHERRY, A DEVELOPMENTAL PSYCHOLOGIST AT ULSTER UNIVERSITY, IS WORKING ON A GROUND-BREAKING, LONGITUDINAL STUDY ACROSS NORTHERN IRELAND, THE AIM OF WHICH IS TO UNDERSTAND HOW DIFFERENT CARE PATHWAYS IMPACT THE LIVES OF YOUNG PEOPLE IN CARE

## TALK LIKE A DEVELOPMENTAL PSYCHOLOGIST

**SELF-ESTEEM** – confidence in your own value and abilities

**ATTACHMENT THEORY** – a psychological theory that young children need to develop a deep emotional relationship with at least one carer for normal social development

**PEER PRESSURE** – the influence a social group has on its members to fit in with its expectations

**BIRTH PARENT** – the biological parent of a child, who may be different to the parent who raises the child

**LONGITUDINAL STUDY** – making continuous or repeated observations of the same participants (a group of individuals, for example) over prolonged periods of time, often years or decades

Every child needs someone to look after them. Sometimes, for many different reasons, a child's birth parents are unable to do so. When that happens, the local authority helps to find them someone else to live with. This is the care system. Going into the care system is probably more common than you think: in the UK in 2020, over 100,000 children were in care.

Through no fault of their own, being in the care system can be disruptive to a child's upbringing, so researchers are working to understand how it can be improved. One of these researchers is Dr Dominic Sherry, a developmental psychologist at Ulster University, who has been studying the lives of hundreds of children in care. His project, the 'Care Pathways and Outcomes Study', has discovered that one of the keys to support children's health and wellbeing is ensuring that children stay with the same carers over a long period of time.

## WHAT HAPPENS WHEN A CHILD GOES INTO CARE?

In Northern Ireland, where Dom works, and similar to the rest of the UK, a child will generally be in one of five types of placement: adoption, foster care, Residence Order, kinship foster care, or living with birth parents.

In both adoption and foster care, the child lives with a different family to the one they were born into. The difference is to do with who is legally and financially responsible for the child. In adoption, responsibility for the child is given completely to the new carers, who are known as adoptive parents. However, in a foster placement, the birth parents and the local authority share a legal responsibility for the child, and the foster parents receive money to help look after them. If everything is going well for the child, then a decision can be taken for the local authority not to be involved anymore, turning the arrangement into a Residence Order.

Adoptive or foster parents can be complete strangers to the birth family, but those working in the care system usually first try to find someone who is a friend or relative to look after the child. This arrangement is kinship foster care. Finally, some children will return to live with their birth parents if they become able to care for them again.

## WHY IS IT IMPORTANT TO STUDY THE CARE SYSTEM?

Every child's experience of care is unique, and many children in care build strong, loving





relationships with their new families, helping them to lead happy and successful lives. Compared to children who are not in care, however, they are more likely to encounter difficulties. People who were in care tend to do less well at school, and have a higher chance of becoming unemployed or sent to prison than people who are or have been raised by their birth parents. They are also more likely to have health problems and low self-esteem.

#### SETTING UP THE CARE PATHWAYS AND OUTCOMES STUDY

The Care Pathways and Outcomes Study includes every one of the 374 children in Northern Ireland who were in care and under the age of five in March 2000. Dom says, “It is the only study in the world that has been able to follow a population of young children through the care system and see how they get on across the different types of experiences that they have. The study is important because it will help us to understand how children form new parental relationships, what difficulties they might experience in this regard, and how such difficulties might be overcome. I’ve also been very fortunate to be supported in this work by excellent colleagues over the years, such as Dr Montse Fargas Malet, Ms Kerrylee Weatherall, Mr Clive Robinson, Dr Greg Kelly, Dr Emma Larkin and currently Dr Grainne McAnee.”

This knowledge will help the professionals who operate the care system in Northern Ireland to see what works well, what does not work so well, and to make better informed choices in the future. Furthermore, the findings from the study could be applicable to other care systems across the UK and around the world.

#### HOW CAN WE COMPARE INDIVIDUAL EXPERIENCES OF THE CARE SYSTEM?

To draw conclusions about the care system, psychologists like Dom need a way to compare

how different young people are getting on. This can be done using questionnaires that have already been tried and tested on a range of people in the community. These ‘standardised measures’ allow researchers to see the differences in the answers given by people in care. The questionnaires used in the Care Pathways and Outcomes Study asked the young people about their relationships with their parents/carers and friends and how they felt about themselves.

The young people in the study were also interviewed to gain a fuller understanding of their experiences. This was done carefully so as to make sure they understood what the study was about and that they definitely wanted to be involved. Dom explains, “We were very conscious that we would be speaking about quite sensitive issues with these young people”. To help the young people engage in a fun way, the interviewers developed board games and storybook activities. They also gave them the opportunity to move on from any question or topic that they did not want to talk about using ‘stop’ and ‘move on’ signs.

The purpose of asking the children in the study to complete questionnaires and interviews was to try and see the care system from their perspective. Dom and his team analysed their answers and found some surprising results.

#### WHAT MAKES FOR A SUCCESSFUL PLACEMENT, ACCORDING TO THE CHILDREN?

Adoption is often seen as the ‘gold standard’ placement for children in care, but the findings of Dom’s study challenge this view. He and his colleagues found that children in other types of placement were just as happy and had equally strong attachments to their carers. The important thing did not appear to be the type of placement, but whether they had been in



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#### FIELD OF RESEARCH

Developmental Psychology

#### RESEARCH PROJECT

The Care Pathways and Outcomes Study  
– a project following the lives of hundreds  
of children in care in Northern Ireland

#### FUNDER

Economic and Social Research Council  
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the same placement for a long period of time. The study also found that the perspectives of parents and carers sometimes differed from those of the young people. This shows how important it is to ensure that young people’s voices are included in research about them.

#### WHAT WILL THE CARE PATHWAYS AND OUTCOMES STUDY LOOK AT NEXT?

The study is now in its fourth phase, following the young people through their late teens and into early adulthood. This can be a tricky time for young people’s relationships with their parents/carers, as they start to seek independence and peer pressure plays a strong role in their behaviour. The hormonal changes during adolescence can also impact a young person’s mood, and parents/carers can get frustrated when they do not understand what is going on.

Although these tensions occur in all families, when they happen for young people in care it can be more serious, as either side can request a placement move if there is an argument, and social care professionals are also likely to be involved. This intense pressure means that the risk of placement breakdown increases during the teenage years. By studying this phase, Dom and his colleagues hope to understand how and why this happens in more detail.

# ABOUT DEVELOPMENTAL PSYCHOLOGY

Think about what you were like two years ago. Do you feel like you are still the same person today? How have your thoughts, feelings and behaviour changed? Developmental psychology tries to understand these changes over our whole lives, but with a special focus on childhood and adolescence as these are when the most dramatic changes occur.

Good developmental psychologists are inquisitive, open-minded and sensitive to the challenges that research participants might face. They are prepared to engage at all levels of society, and always conscious of the historical context of developmental psychological theory.

## IS DEVELOPMENTAL RESEARCH STILL BIASED TOWARDS WESTERN CULTURES?

"I do agree that this is the case," says Dom. "The original theories of developmental psychology emerged in the 1900s in developed Western countries, and were written particularly by white, middle-class males. That lack of diversity is an issue, as it means those theories were heavily influenced by a particular culture, in which women, poorer people and non-white people were considered inferior. However, today we can look critically at those theories from other perspectives, and progress has been made in boosting diversity in the field." For example, when Dom became the editor of an academic

journal, one of the first things he did was to make sure that the scope of the journal included consideration of race and ethnicity.

## WHERE CAN DEVELOPMENTAL PSYCHOLOGY TAKE YOU?

After a degree in developmental psychology, you can move into a wide range of areas, such as social work, youth work, the police, media, advertising and recruitment. The great thing about developmental psychology is that it focuses on why we behave the way we do, and how our understanding of the world changes from the moment we are born. So, any profession that requires an understanding of human behaviour will benefit from your perspective.

## EXPLORE A CAREER IN DEVELOPMENTAL PSYCHOLOGY

- Meet some more developmental psychologists and learn about what they do on the American Psychological Association's website: [www.apa.org/education-career/guide/subfields/developmental/education-training](http://www.apa.org/education-career/guide/subfields/developmental/education-training)
  - Explore the eight stages of human psychological development at [www.simplypsychology.org/Erik-Erikson.html](http://www.simplypsychology.org/Erik-Erikson.html)
  - Some psychologists also work in healthcare. Explore career options in the NHS at [www.healthcareers.nhs.uk/explore-roles/psychological-therapies/roles-psychological-therapies](http://www.healthcareers.nhs.uk/explore-roles/psychological-therapies/roles-psychological-therapies)
  - Dom says, "At Ulster University, students completing the BSc in psychology will get the opportunity to do a year-long placement with an organisation in some area related to psychology. This allows them to develop skills and gain experience that will support their future career aspirations."
  - Ulster University also hosts regular seminar series that postgraduate students and lecturers can attend and contribute to. "Very often, a leading psychologist, or a key external partner organisation, will be invited to talk about their work or provide training to both staff and students," says Dom. "The university's student union offers a wide range of courses and activities that students can engage in, both educational and fun. There is lots of support for any student who may be struggling with their own personal issues, for example, our 'Mind Your Mood' campaign. It is one big community at Ulster University, and we all support each other."
- [www.ulster.ac.uk/faculties/life-and-health-sciences/psychology](http://www.ulster.ac.uk/faculties/life-and-health-sciences/psychology)
- It is worth looking at other universities, too, to see if they offer similar experiences.

## PATHWAY FROM SCHOOL TO DEVELOPMENTAL PSYCHOLOGY

- You don't need to take all three sciences for a psychology degree, but most universities look for at least one out of chemistry, physics, biology or maths.
- Some schools offer psychology at A-level, and other useful subjects could include sociology, geography, anthropology, economics, politics, philosophy and history.
- To remain in psychology after your first degree you would normally complete a master's and sometimes a doctorate degree, to become qualified as a clinical, educational, occupational or research psychologist.





# HOW DID DOM BECOME A DEVELOPMENTAL PSYCHOLOGIST?

## WHAT DID YOU WANT TO BE WHEN YOU WERE YOUNGER?

I was very fortunate that GCSE (O) level psychology was introduced to my school curriculum when I was 15. I was selecting my choices at the time and thought it sounded interesting. The first lesson I took was focused on 'attachment theory', that innate process where children form a relationship with their parents or carers from birth. I'm still doing attachment research today! Suffice to say, I was immediately hooked and knew that this was what I wanted to do for the rest of my life.

## WHAT OTHER SUBJECTS DID YOU STUDY AT SCHOOL?

I also studied history, French, Italian, chemistry, physics, mathematics and English literature at school. I particularly enjoyed history and would probably have pursued that avenue if psychology hadn't come along. It's very focused on key historical figures and their impact on the world, and I was always interested in why these people did what they did, and how other people responded to them.

## YOU HAVE SPENT YOUR CAREER RESEARCHING THE IMPACT OF ADVERSITY AND TRAUMA IN CHILDHOOD. ARE THERE ANY POSITIVES?

It needs to be acknowledged that some aspect of stress in life can be a good thing, as it can keep you focused on what matters to you at

that time, and motivate you to do your best. However, it is difficult to imagine how the experience of trauma can ever be considered a positive. Trauma emerges when the system is overloaded by stress, when our natural resources for managing stress have been spent, and can lead to significant mental health illness.

## HAVE YOUR STUDIES CHANGED YOU IN ANY WAY?

I think my work has made me more aware of the challenges that other people in society have to face. I have found that many problems such as homelessness, addiction and crime have their roots in early traumatic experiences. That perspective allows you to be very humble and empathetic. Two great scholars writing in this area at the moment are Bruce Perry and Gabor Mate. They ask not 'what is wrong with you?', but 'what happened to you?'. This approach takes the blame away from people who are struggling, and focuses on their experiences, which they will have had little control over in their early lives. This is a very positive ethos, and it really grounds my work.

## WHAT DO YOU ENJOY MOST ABOUT YOUR WORK?

I get to work with some amazingly talented people in universities and across our communities in social work departments, schools, hospitals and voluntary organisations. I enjoy organising and conducting research,

setting research questions and gathering the data to be able to answer these questions. It can be quite exciting at times! I also find it rewarding to work with people who have experience of care or adversity in their lives. This is expertise by experience and is such a vital companion to academic knowledge.

## DOM'S TOP TIPS

- 01** Work hard but keep an interest in other things too, such as sport and music. You'll be able to fall back on these for relief and distraction when you need them.
- 02** Remain inquisitive at all times, and never accept anything as definitive, at an individual and group level. People change and evolve throughout their lives, and as such our understanding of individual and societal development needs to change and evolve too.
- 03** Keep the link between understanding human development and improving health and wellbeing at the centre of your thoughts.
- 04** Enjoy the fact that you get to study and discover new things about human beings. How exciting is that!