Introduction

Hello and welcome to *Learn on the go*, the podcast from Community Care Inform. I'm Natalie Valios, senior content editor at Inform Adults. With me is Destiny Nicholls and we're talking about how the language and actions from social workers and foster carers can have ramifications well beyond a child's time in care.

Destiny spent her childhood in and out of care and her experiences have led her to write a guide about caring for black hair and skin because she doesn't want any other young black person to feel the way she was made to feel – different.

So thanks for coming on the podcast to share your story today, Destiny. We're not going to talk too much about why you went into care but let's just start with how old you were.

[00:00:42 on the podcast]

Destiny: I have been in and out of the care since I was about two/three years old. A short time sometimes, maybe just a few weeks, back and forth for social services just being involved. But, yeah, it's been back and forth, inconsistent, so yeah I've really had a bit of both living with my family, in care out of care.

In and out of care

[00:01:06 on the podcast]

Natalie: It sounds like from what you've just said there was a cycle of going in and out of care and in between being returned to your mum I believe it was, which must have been really difficult that to-ing and fro-ing. And also you said to me when we spoke earlier about what we're going to talk about on the podcast today, that your mum moved around a lot so it meant that you had to apply to several local authorities to access your care files.

Did reading your files shed any light on why you kept being returned home? And do you think it was ever the right decision to place you back with your mum?

Destiny: After reading the files, I've still not read all of them, there was so much for me to unpack, four different local authorities. So from reading each bit, it's like a jigsaw puzzle where my mum would be living in one place and then moves to the next. You need the other local authorities to mix the puzzle together and get them into the correct places.

But I feel as though I shouldn't have been returned because in the report there are a lot of reports of abuse and people having concerns and social workers then being like, "Well your mum's okay" and then people saying that "she's not, she's unstable, Destiny seems like she's not getting the care and she's being neglected" and reports of some sexual abuse at a young age. So I feel like in my eyes if you see this happening and after sending the child back you're getting another thing that's coming up concerning, I feel as though I should have been taken away and not placed back.

But I feel as though my mum made it very difficult as she would up and leave, and then be like "Okay, new home, new place, let's start again". So that also meant different schools for me, new sets of friends, never anywhere that was stable, it was very up and down.

But I didn't think it was that up and down until I read my files because to me, I feel like, I was probably here for a long time, but obviously I don't remember much of it.

Probably because like, you know, trauma, you block it out, you don't think about it. So when you look at my files, then you go, okay, yeah, I really was up and down, all over the place. It's kind of like a shock.

I feel like your brain blurs it out. So you don't actually think that. But yeah, it was very, it was very like shocking to read.

[00:03:35 on the podcast]

Natalie: It must have been really difficult. And I wondered if you knew roughly how many foster carers you were placed with during those years in and out of care?

Destiny: Oh gosh this is a really good question. If I could go off the top of my head, from what I remember, I'm gonna go for an estimate of maybe 10. Potentially might even be possible more than 10 but I'm gonna say 10.

[00:04:00 on the podcast]

Natalie: How long were you with most of them for on average or did it really differ?

Destiny: It was very different, my longest was with my best carer and that was probably about I want to say two years. I was very settled there until I wasn't because of a breakdown and I think my shortest one's probably about three, four days.

I really liked them but it was like a short transition, you know how you come out of like a broken down, I think it was broken down from like my mum or something, could be wrong. I would come from somewhere and it broke down and this was like an emergency foster carer, immediately took me in, made me feel very at home but I think I was only there for like two nights, three nights, it wasn't very long, I was off again.

Foster placement breakdown

[00:04:45 on the podcast]

Natalie: And the longest placement you had – you said about two years you thought – was your best placement but sadly it broke down. How did that leave you feeling?

Destiny: The man was so lovely, he was like a dad to me, always there, understood me better than anybody else, he really took the time to understand. But it was just a really hard breakdown and I feel like over the years after I left, I always felt like I lost that relationship after I left because it was so abrupt and out of nowhere.

Obviously it wasn't really out of nowhere, it was a build-up of ongoing problems. As time went on my emotions may have got more difficult. I became less hearing and understanding, a lot more just lash out, I don't care.

But he was always there to settle it and calm it down and he was just the calm in the storm and I always felt like I lost that relationship. But I saw him a few months ago and it's still so lovely and he talks nothing but good about me and I always thought like maybe because of everything that happened, his thoughts on me may have changed but no, he still thinks of me as Destiny who's just misunderstood and still calls me really lovely actually and says I'm actually a sweetheart which is really lovely. It is really nice to know that he still deeply cares and it didn't affect our relationship which is really nice.

[00:06:12 on the podcast]

Natalie: It sounds like he's important to you, Destiny. Do you think there's scope to keep in contact with him?

Destiny: We are trying to meet for lunch or have some dinner which would be really nice and just have a catch-up. He's got other foster children now and in my head I go, you guys are so lucky to have a wonderful man like that who truly cares in what he's doing.

He's passionate about children and making children's lives better and it was just so amazing to have people like that working in the system and trying to make children's lives better because we need people like that who really do care and really want to understand that all these children are coming from different backgrounds and we are fragile and it's hard. So definitely something to take on board when you are fostering.

[00:07:02 on the podcast]

Natalie: It must have felt like a real loss when you left there.

Destiny: I feel like that set the motion in because of all my other placements, they've been so up and down, bad and then to come from that, I felt like I couldn't trust another foster placement again. Never thought I'd find a person like that again and I don't think I ever did.

So I definitely feel like that loss affected me in more than one ways, emotionally, mentally, it really did affect me on all levels. But obviously I don't think no one really knew that. I feel like everyone just thought, yeah, Destiny, been to loads of moves, she can get over it. Nobody ever actually spoke to me about it and I had to deal with it my own really and it was a lot.

Repercussions

[00:07:48 on the podcast]

Natalie: How do you feel that constantly moving between living with your mum and then with different foster carers affected you, Destiny?

Destiny: I was a very emotional child. I felt things very big, felt things very massively and sometimes as a child I could just have these moments where I just feel like erupting and shouting and screaming. Sometimes I'd be known as the child that just wouldn't listen or you know very chaotic, so I do feel like it played a role in how I behaved as a child.

[00:08:22 on the podcast]

Natalie: And you've told me that as a teenager you started drinking and taking drugs to deal with or block out what you were going through. What do you think have been the repercussions for you as an adult?

Destiny: I feel like it's had a massive impact – in my previous relationship I feel like I let a lot of things slide because I felt like that was normal behaviour. The things I witnessed as a child and…the way I thought that's how somebody should treat you or it's okay because I've been through this before. So I feel like it very much played a role into how I let people treat me and the things I put myself through because I thought that was normal. But then also I would feel things very much.

Over the years I've got a lot better at it. I feel like I erupted a lot. I would blow out and be effing and blinding, everything's a lot and I would make a lot of people feel away from me because I would just explode and then I found it very hard to trust people and to let people in. And I would be defensive, you could be just being fake and, you know, not really being very real. So I found it hard to trust people and let them in.

Listen, don't judge

[00:09:43 on the podcast]

Natalie: And that's hardly surprising, is it?

And with so little consistency both with where you were living and who you were living with, as well as who was supporting you in a professional capacity, it must have been really hard to know who you could turn to and, as you say, trust. I think you estimated you had as many as 30, or even more, social workers involved in your life. What do you remember about how they worked with you and what advice would you give our listeners about their approach when working with children in care?

Destiny: I had a lot of social workers who would be there for a day and then leave so I definitely experienced and remember a lot of social workers coming and going.

I guess it's hard when you're constantly changing back and forth, but I feel like it's trying to build trust with the people that are working with you and trying to establish that these are safe people for you to be able to have in your life and to be able to actually let them in to work with you. So I feel like it's been a mix, like I've had some people from local authorities who have been amazing, they've listened to me, they've let me shout and scream and let my emotions out and some have just ignored everything I've said and just labelled me as another statistic in their books.

So I do really feel like it's about listening to the young person and not just judging them off of their files or what somebody else has said about them, because I feel like that just really puts them back in a statistic, which we're not a statistic.

We're individual people and we have our own thoughts and our own feelings. And I feel like that's a major thing for them to, you know, work with and be able to work with young people.

Some people would say I was difficult, I was one of the children that if you say something wrong I really will explode. So yeah I very much on numerous times told social workers to "F off" and lots of words under the sun were used and I'd slam doors and say that I'm not speaking to them because my initial thought is you've read my file, you are going to assume I can't control my emotions, I put myself in dangerous situations.

With that in mind I played to what I thought they were going to think of me because they wouldn't actually believe the person who I actually really was. I feel like when it comes to meeting children and trying to build that trust is being honest and being like, "Yeah I have your files but that still doesn't make me know you, I need to get to know you as a person. And I want you to tell me who you are and what it's like for you because I don't want to assume, I don't want to think that what is in here is actually what you're like."

People can change, the way I was five, six years ago isn't the person that I am now, I am very different, I've changed and I've grown and things happen and give you life experiences which shape you as a person and make you do things differently. So I really feel like it's about listening

and if they need to vent, let them vent whether it's swearing, shouting, deciding they don't want to talk to you, it's just you sitting there going, “Okay, well I'm here for you when you want to talk. I can sit here for half an hour and see if you're going to come back and speak with me and if not I'm a call away and I can come back again.”

But it's the repetitiveness, just because they won’t speak to you once, let them know that, “Okay I'll sit here for about 10 more minutes see if you want to speak to me, if you don't, cool I'll go. I'll try and pick another day with you and we can speak again”.

[00:13:42 on the podcast]

It's persistence because I feel like sometimes social workers go, “Okay, well they didn't want to speak to me, they're unco-operative, so I'm not going to make an effort”. But we need people who need to be consistent and the same as family, real family would be, you wouldn't turn your back on them so don't do that and continue to be nice, open, friendly and learn what they like, whether it's you know, let's say, “Okay, how about we go for a chat, go grab your favourite food” or you know “let's go for a walk”. Making it something that they feel comfortable with and if you can't get to that straight away then just making it known to them that you are there and you aren't going anywhere and you're there to listen and then you can speak about it to help them.

[00:14:29 on the podcast]

Natalie: You weren’t listened to, were you?

Destiny: I feel as though when I come out with things about stuff that happened to me as a child, some people just took it as I'm a storyteller and nothing I said was actually like you know true or factual. So I really believe when a young person is telling you something, whether or not that person has history of lying or telling stuff, you really need to make that person feel as though you are somebody they can talk to, a trustee, and not make them feel as though that they're just telling another story.

Because at the end of the day it just makes them feel as though they can't open up and they can't tell things and this is when, especially me as a young child, you don't feel like you can tell anybody, so you keep things a secret and things get worse and they just build up and you just feel like you can't tell anyone.

Me growing up as a kid, I feel like I wasn't listened to a lot. So what it meant for me growing up as a teenager, I would just do what I want. I would put myself in unsafe situations, going out drinking and meeting random people because I didn't feel like I had a safe space.

I didn't feel like I had somebody that I could go back to. So it just makes you feel as though you're alone. So you just do things that make you feel like, okay, these people are my safe people, but you know they're not.

[00:16:05 on the podcast]

Natalie: So it’s about being consistent isn’t it, to be able to build that trust so a child feels safe to say when bad things are happening. When you tried to tell social workers what was going on and they didn’t hear it or believe you, how did it make you feel?

Destiny: You have nowhere to turn, you have nowhere to go to, you don't have family, you don't have anybody that you can trust. So it just makes you feel very alone and in the dark.

[00:16:29 on the podcast]

Natalie: So for practitioners listening would you say your message is that just hear what a child is saying, investigate it, you know look into it, be inquisitive?

Destiny: I feel like everybody's voices needs to be heard and whether or not you have opinions or feelings on certain matters, a young person should be able to come tell you something and you take it as serious as your daughter or your son or your nephew or your cousin telling you something; it's the same level of seriousness. Every young person should feel as though that what they're saying is serious and that person takes that information and deals with it in the right manner.

Trust dented

[00:17:12 on the podcast]

Natalie: And talking about opening up and telling a social worker about what's happening and not getting the right response, you had one experience in particular didn't you, Destiny, that really dented your trust in social workers?

Destiny: So I had a social worker who lasted 24 hours. When you have these meetings, I forgot what they're called, you have everybody there, you have your foster carers, your school, everybody there in one room.

I opened up and spoke about everything I was going through. I was dealing with a lot of depression and I was self-harming and I didn't really feel comfortable in myself.

So I thought as though the social worker needed to be informed of everything so it wasn't unknown to her and she had a full picture of me.

I bared my soul, told her everything that I was going through with my family and how I felt and how I was struggling and really just let her know who I was in that specific time and how hard it was, what I was going through. And yeah, 24 hours later, she was gone. And I feel as though it made me feel so...I opened up and told this woman everything about my life.

And then the next minute she was gone. So she left knowing all this information about me when she didn't need to know that information. I felt like it was a breach of my safety and my own personal information she didn't need to know. I feel as though when social workers are coming in, it needs to really be clear if you are going to stay in this person's life, you're going to be consistent, and if they're not then no information needs to really be shared other than what they feel is necessary.

And they shouldn't have the young person open up and tell you because I feel as though it just makes you feel vulnerable because now this random person knows everything about you and I'm not going to see this person again but she knows stuff that I didn't need to share with her. It was not a nice feeling for me. I don't know, I can't put it into words, it's a lot.

I felt as though everything that you just said left you bare. This person now can go and tell their friends, their mum, even though it's a breach of what they're doing but they could. They could share all this information about you and you don't know if you're walking past this person one day, it makes you feel very scared, makes you feel as though you don't know who to trust or whether that person that just walked past you knows everything about your life. It makes you really feel unsafe.

Yeah, that's the best way to put it. I don't know how to describe that, but it's a horrible feeling.

[00:20:18 on the podcast]

Natalie: I think you've described it really well. You've actually opened up to somebody, which takes a lot to do in the first place, and then they've just walked away. Like you say, bared your soul and been vulnerable and said everything that's going on. It must make you lose trust because to then open up to another social worker that comes in must be practically impossible to do.

And then what's written in case files is “they won't engage”.

Destiny: And it's not the case because I've engaged once and I bared my soul and that person literally just disappeared. So, yeah, it did make me shut down and when it comes to other social workers I didn't want to speak, I didn't want to communicate with them because I didn't know if you were going to be here tomorrow or next week.

So why am I going to make myself vulnerable for you to be gone within the next week or so. I didn't want to put myself in that situation, that's where my trust with social workers really took a step down and I felt like I couldn't trust them.

[00:21:23 on the podcast]

Natalie: That's the message isn't it? Is if they're saying “won't engage” it's like question...

Destiny: Why aren't they engaging? Is there something that's happened? Did they feel as though they were vulnerable? It's very much the question of what's happened? Why did it happen? Why do they feel that way?

The importance of language

[00:21:44 on the podcast]

Natalie: That’s a really important point for practitioners to bear in mind. And something else that social workers and foster carers need to get right is the language they use and this is something you really wanted to talk about on the podcast today, Destiny – the damage caused by language and racism because sadly you've been affected by both.

If we start with language, what do you remember about the words that were used to describe you and did it affect you at the time, or is it now as an adult you can see the harm it caused?

Destiny: In some of my files some social workers called me manipulating and controlling but I feel like I was just a child and when you go through certain things as a child you display certain behaviours and it's the reason behind why a child is acting a certain way. So I don't believe any child is really manipulating or controlling.

I feel like when you're young and you hear people speak about you like that, it's a lot. People would say I was volatile, sometimes unhinged.

I wasn't able to control myself and I would just lash out. So I feel like when people were painting me with those words, you act as if you are that and you be the person that they're painting you out to be.

Even though I knew deep down that wasn't me, I was just dealing with a lot of stuff. And I didn't know how to deal with those emotions and I didn't have a safe place where I could go or someone to talk to.

So you feel like there's no other way to present yourself other than what people are saying that you are. So you just become that person.

[00:23:26 on the podcast]

Natalie: So it's that situation of, if you think I'm like that, I'm going to be like that because what's there to lose kind of thing**.** You think I'm like that anyway.

When we spoke you'd said you had been called attention seeking from about the age of six and disruptive and naughty, which I find incredible when you're labelling a child in those terms especially at that young age but at any age to be honest.

Did you find any inappropriate language used to describe you when you went through your care files?

Destiny: When I was speaking about this to the person I was going through my files with, they would say "it was a different time back then" – even though it wasn't that long ago – "people had different ways of describing children". So yeah they would call me attention seeking, controlling, manipulating, all sorts of words under the sun. And you'd think that these social workers wouldn't talk about you like that as you are speaking about a child and this is somebody's life who you can clearly see in their files that have been through trauma, and they've been neglected and they've been in all sorts of situations. You'd think that they'd be mindful of how they are speaking. But no.

I feel like when you're speaking about a young person – me personally if I was in that situation – you would write about that person as if you're speaking to that person and they're hearing those words because they do eventually see these files, and that is what you wrote about them, and it's not a nice thing to see.

Because I don't believe I was those things at all. When you're a child you have a feeling and you think, okay they might see me this way but you don't think that's actually true because they're meant to be your safe person you can speak to and they tell you the very much opposite. So when you actually see it when you're older it is very shocking to come to terms with.

[00:25:25 on the podcast]

Natalie: You're only 23 are you?

Destiny: I'm 24.

Natalie: So it's not that long ago and there is no excuse is there? And like you say, care files should be written bearing in mind that that child can access them when they're older, so to think about what they're going to read about themselves and their lives.

It's as though they're seeing trouble rather than trauma, but how do you get them to understand that?

Destiny: I feel like when you look at it, it is trauma instead of trouble. When you look at this young person you think if they were quote unquote a normal child, happy family, they would not be under social services, they would not be in the system. You automatically look at this child as being subjected to something or witnessing something that no child should witness.

This is a vulnerable child, they are a victim in what they're going through and they need help. So whatever the circumstances of what they've been through and it makes them behave a certain

way, look a certain way, you're there to help that child and to help that child only. So you should have no assumptions, opinions on this child whatsoever, other than this is somebody that I need to help and they are this way because of what they've been subjected to or witnessed.

[00:26:46 on the podcast]

Natalie: And were you shocked when you saw some of the language in your care files? How did it make you feel?

Destiny: I think it made me feel as though I was a troubled child, which I was, but I was just naughty. Don't get me wrong, I feel like I was a hard person to be around at times, but the way that they spoke about me could have been very different.

Trauma not trouble

[00:27:14 on the podcast]

Natalie: Is there any advice you have for social workers about how they distinguish between trouble and trauma if they're seeing it as trouble and signs they should be looking out for, things they should be asking about, things they should be exploring?

Destiny: I think that they really need to look into the child and what they're going through, why they're going through that, and explore all avenues. And if this person you feel like is going down the troubled route, then you explore it for them to get help. Because every child needs saving and every child can take a different path before they go down the wrong one.

I feel like it's the way we explore things and the way we manage things. You can make a child feel as though they are nothing but trouble but they could have been saved if you changed the way you spoke to them, the way you managed them, if you got them help and said, “Do you know what, I feel as though you would benefit if you spoke to such and such a person and I am another person you can speak to”, making them feel as though they aren't alone in that they have somebody there.

They don't have anybody else. Most of us young people, we don't have somebody to call up and cry on the phone to or somebody to share our celebrations with. We don't all have that. So I definitely feel as though you're meant to be our next thing, which is a family and the family will help no matter what and help you get back on the right path and not just put you down as trouble and you can't be helped.

The impact of racism

[00:28:49 on the podcast]

Natalie: And sadly you experienced racism in several foster homes. What forms do you remember that taking?

Destiny: In one of them I wasn't allowed to eat with everybody else. I had to eat afterwards so I just decided not to. I'd stay in my bedroom and yeah I'd just wait until I went to my sister's or I'd been out and...

It wasn't a nice feeling to be separated. But yeah, it'd be other things like I needed a new uniform, but they wouldn't get me a new uniform.

They said the stuff that I had was already fine. And my sister and her partner had to say something. But that just ended up in an argument and me being a troublesome child who's just complaining about nothing.

My sister and her partner made it very clear that they were being racist and this was another child it wouldn't have been the case but they didn't hear that.

I feel as though after that you just take it on the chin and you just feel as though like you know you just have to move on with it. But it's not something a child should have to be subjected to or made to feel out of place. Definitely felt uncomfortable and made to feel I didn't fit in and that I was very different from them.

When you go through it you feel a lot of things and then when you come back to think about your experience it's so hard to describe and to name it because you just think gosh that was a lot.

There's not really many words you can put it into. It's really hard and I feel like no one should be treated that way and you should expect when you're fostering you can have a white child, a black child, a brown child, doesn't matter what colour, what race, what their beliefs are. You are there to support and make that child feel safe and I feel like that's just not what I felt. I felt very much an outcast.

[00:31:06 on the podcast]

Natalie: Eating separately, I actually can't get my head around.

Destiny: Yes.

Natalie: It's, yeah, it's stunning. Yeah, I actually don't know what to say to that. I'm really sorry.

Destiny: No, that's okay.

Natalie: A big element for you was that foster carers never knew how to look after your hair and skin. How did that make you feel?

Destiny: It made me feel as though I was different. Obviously I know I am different, I could see the colour of my skin to them and that it wasn't the same. But “why can't you use what we've got?” “Why isn't that good enough for you?”

Because I am a black child, I have different needs. I have different things that I need to provide for myself and my hair and my skin, which they didn't fully understand. What worked for them should work for me and it was as simple as that. And when eventually I did get round to them like you know being like okay what is it you need, we went to the shops and it's like look at these prices, there's no way you need all this money on just your hair. When it's the case of, yeah, this is expensive, but this is something us black people have to deal with.

It's expensive when you've got some products, it's a monthly thing, sometimes even weekly with how fast you go through products. But to them, it was just as though I was being excessive and it wasn't an actual need. I could just use what they use and that be that.

[00:32:48 on the podcast]

Natalie: Was that with all foster carers? Didn't any of them know?

Destiny: I wouldn't say all foster carers. Some had basic knowledge of, I know you need stuff, tell me the stuff you need, I'll get it.

Which was nice to know, obviously, that they know I'm not being excessive. It's just, I need different stuff. But I've never actually been with a carer who has been able to go, “Okay, this is what you need to do.” Not one carer. Only thing they did know is that it's different, you need products and that's it.

Nobody actually had an in-depth view of like, “Do you know what, I know your hair's different but I've done looking at this, looking at that and I know the basics so I can tell you that", so you don't feel so secluded.

[00:33:42 on the podcast]

Natalie: That's poor isn't it?

Destiny: Because I feel as though it's not a basic need to them or in the system. But I feel as though when you're fostering children, it should be necessary to be able to understand children you're going to have and the needs that they need and to have some knowledge so you don't make children feel as though that they are different or not included.

You feel different to everybody else and it'd just be nice to know that the carers that you've been put with know, “Okay, look, I know the basics, so let's go together.” Just so you just don't feel outcasted and you don't feel alone.

Understanding black hair and skin

[00:34:27 on the podcast]

Natalie: Feeling like an outcast is such a horrible and hard-hitting description of how you were made to feel.

And it's that experience that's led you to write a guide for foster carers on caring for black hair and skin. And at Wokingham Council, where you work in a paid position as a young expert, it's now mandatory for foster carers to have a copy of that guide which must feel amazing for you that you've made that happen.

Destiny: Yeah, I feel like it's a massive accomplishment and younger me I feel would be very, very happy to know that the carers can now not just know the basics, if they don't remember it they can always go back and look at it. I don't know everything, I'm still learning, I learn something new every day.

I had to do research myself to put the right stuff in there to make sure that it was okay, and make sure that it was everything they needed to know, so that when they have another child they can break down that barrier of the conversation of “I need this” or “I need that”. It's them saying to the young person, “Okay, I know that you're gonna need such and such and your hair is different and you can have such and such styles of hair.”

It just makes them feel as though they are different but they're not different at the same time. It makes them feel as though “I understand what's different about you and I can help you with this and I have the basic knowledge to help you if you don't know anything yourself”, and it stops them having that awkward conversation and just opens up another door.

[00:36:08 on the podcast]

Natalie: I’ve read it and learnt a huge amount. I didn’t know there were different types and categories of curly and coily hair, all needing different care and products. What you've achieved

and what you've produced is going to be so helpful. It's just brilliant. And for those who don't understand the link between black hair and skin and identity and belonging, can you tell us a bit about this and why it would have helped you if foster carers had known how to care for your hair and skin? You've talked a little bit about it but the identity and belonging...

Destiny: In a lot of my homes my hair would get matted and tangled and I had to chop off a lot of my hair. And that kind of made me feel as though I lost a bit of myself.

Then it kind of led me to the route of at the age of about 13, I got to the point of like I don't want Afro hair, I went down the relaxer route, I just want straight hair like the rest of my friends. A lot of my friends were white, had straight hair, that's what I wanted to do. I damaged my hair a whole lot, it was so bad. It took a very long time for my natural hair to grow back to the way it was.

Not a lot of my friends were black, but I had a couple, but I wanted to fit in with the rest of my friends. So that would mean relax my hair. It would burn my scalp so much that I'd have the worst, itchiest scalp ever, but I would beg my sister to relax it all the time. And yeah, it would become a regular thing because I didn't know how to deal with it. So I would relax it.

All I had to do was brush my hair and put it up and that was the end of that. So it definitely made me feel confused in my identity because, not that I didn't want to be black, because I love being black myself, but it made me feel as though white people had an easier time if that makes sense.

[00:38:06 on the podcast]

Natalie: It's another example of wanting to belong as well if a lot of your friends were white and fit in isn't it, it's like fitting in with people and making your life easier but then the flip side to that is that you feel like you've lost your black identity because you've kind of getting rid of it by straightening your hair.

Destiny: Yeah, I was giving away a part of myself because I didn't know or understand really how to deal with it. So I decided to give a part of myself away to have an easier life and to be able to fit in.

[00:38:39 on the podcast]

Natalie: That's so heartbreaking, that thought of you giving a little bit of yourself away...

Destiny: Obviously I didn't understand that, it was just, let me fit in. But obviously growing up, you start to realise what you're doing and it becomes more deeper and you understand it in a different way to your younger self because you didn't really know that you were just trying to fit in. But, yeah the more you grow up to realise there was a lot more deeper meaning behind what you're doing.

[00:39:06 on the podcast]

Natalie: And now you've got a partner and your own children, and you're happy...

Destiny: Completely I really feel happy and I feel as though that my children, I want to implement on them, that they have the best of both. They are mixed children.

They have white dads and a black mum. But my daughter, she has the curliest of curliest hair and I want her to be able to feel as though she loves her hair and loves herself and she is a little proud little black woman and she doesn't have to feel as though she needs to change her hair. I

always try to get her to wear her hair out even though sometimes she might not like it and she's like “I don't want it like that, I want it like my friends”. But yeah I really tried to implement in her that she loves her hair because her hair is beautiful and she shouldn't have to change it.

I hope that they will never feel the way that I did.

Messages to take away

[00:40:07 on the podcast]

Natalie: That's a message for everyone isn't it? It's that identity, belonging, feeling proud of who you are, feeling comfortable in your own skin.

What do you think are the most important messages that listeners can take from your story to help other black children in care feel seen and valued?

Destiny: I feel as though it needs to be listening to the child and not taking an assumption from what you've read and hearing what they have to say and seeing their story from their point of view. You sit down with the child you'll get to know that child and you'll see their story from their eyes and you can really tell from the way a person's talking, the way they act, the way they present themselves, you can tell that rather than reading a file because that doesn't make you get to know somebody. It takes time and it takes learning that person and gaining that trust to be able to know and understand really what that person's like rather than what's just wrote down and somebody just making assumptions.

[00:41:15 on the podcast]

Natalie: And what would you say about combating racism and the poor – for want of a better word – language that can be used around children in care?

Destiny: I feel like you really need to be mindful and not make a child feel that they're out of place, even though they're not the same, you are two different identities. Making them feel included and that the needs that they need aren't very much different from yours, even though they are different, but just making them feel as one. And we all do it: if you need to cream your skin more, then we will cream our skin more. If you need to do your hair, then we're all going to go shopping to get our hair done and do what needs to be done.

It's making everybody feel as though they are one. And, you know, if you need to do something, then we all go and do it and not making it feel as though that they are completely different and it's like, “Okay let's go and do this because this is what *you* need”. It's more of a “let's go together and let's do this as a family” because when you're going into somebody's home you become a part of their family so it's being as one.

[00:42:23 on the podcast]

Natalie: Thank you, Destiny, that’s a good message to end on. And I’m conscious you’ve been squeezing a stress ball the whole time through this conversation so it’s obviously been hard to revisit things. So I really appreciate you coming on the podcast today, sharing your experiences and speaking out on the damage that racism and language cause.

It sounds like every foster carer in the country should have a copy of your guide. And I think you've given some really important messages to our listeners, so thank you very much.

You can tune into all our *Learn on the go* episodes with written transcripts on the Inform sites and if you're listening to this on any podcast app you can find all past episodes and subscribe to the series there.

So until next time, thanks for listening and goodbye.