

Until 2016, when Emily Aklan set up Serenity Welfare, any involvement in the care and welfare sector was one of the last things on her mind. She had a daughter, a busy home life and a successful career in real estate and construction. But then life took a terrible turn.

‘My sister tragically died young and her ex-husband returned from abroad to kidnap her children – my nieces – and take them back to Cyprus. I fought for years to get them back and successfully gain custody,’ Emily says.

‘But a friend of mine who works in the care sector told me about what might have happened to them had they eventually ended up in the care system. After going through such a traumatic period of grief and stress, hearing about what happened to children in the care system sparked something in me.’

CUFFS ON KIDS

What caused Emily most concern was the practice of handcuffing children in care, particularly while in transit. That inspired her to create Serenity Welfare: a best-practice secure transport provider that set out

ONE-TO-ONE INTERVIEW

SHAKING THE SHACKLES



Emily Aklan, the driving force behind the Hope Instead of Handcuffs campaign, talks about the worryingly prevalent but little-known issue of using restraints on children in care.

ABOUT THE CAMPAIGN

Hope Instead of Handcuffs has three core objectives:

- 1 Legislate to ban the handcuffing, restraining, or caging of children except when there is a considerable risk of the child harming themselves or others
- 2 Recognise that a new approach is needed that treats vulnerable children as victims instead of criminals and that provides them with the consistent, timely and high-quality interventions they need to rebuild their lives
- 3 Allocate a government minister to have specific responsibility for supporting the mentoring of vulnerable and at-risk children.

to ‘treat children with dignity and respect’. More recently, it has also led Emily to launch the Hope Instead of Handcuffs campaign (see *About the campaign*, left), which is calling on the UK Government to outlaw the use of restraints on children unless under exceptional circumstances.

‘The issue here – and it sounds bizarre me saying this as someone who owns a secure transport business – is private secure transport providers who view frightened and traumatised young people as “problem children” who are “acting up”,’ says Emily. ‘So they restrain as a first resort, rather than employing basic human decency and empathy and working to make children feel safe.’

‘These situations can arise whenever private secure transport is required. These journeys could be to and from care placements, foster homes, hospitals, family courts, schools: any journey where a vulnerable child needs extra support. It happens in England, Scotland and Wales, can happen regardless of how a child has behaved – though of course it’s never appropriate – and to a wide range of ages.’

‘The youngest person I have worked with who had been handcuffed by another provider was only 10 years old.’

‘But there is no regulatory requirement to report instances

of the use of restraints by private transport providers. Those working in youth justice do, care homes do, but secure transport is the loophole.’

THE SCALE OF THE PROBLEM

With no need to report the use of restraints, it is difficult to quantify the magnitude of the problem, which is one of the reasons why Hope Instead of Handcuffs is calling for government action.

‘It’s difficult to end the practice until we know the scale of it. Those of us who work in the industry know that this is a commonplace practice by certain providers, and I’d estimate that this is happening to hundreds of children around the country every year. But it’s unregulated and there are no confirmed statistics – meaning all

these children’s stories and experiences are never recorded, making change that bit more difficult too,’ Emily says.

Of course, service providers who use such measures would claim they have good reason. But Emily says there are other ways, and in the case of Serenity Welfare’s secure transport services, there has never been an occasion when restraints were necessary.

‘Compassion, unfortunately, is not the default in many areas of children’s social care. These children are terrified – they’ve experienced traumas in their young lives that most adults never will, so naturally they can be suspicious or fearful of authorities. What they need is the time and kindness to work with them, so that they come on journeys willingly – which is what our child-centred approach is all about,’ Emily adds.

‘De-escalation and mentoring are the two main techniques we use. What’s more, they work. Not once have we had to restrain a young

person. What children need sounds quite basic, but it’s in short supply: being treated with patience and empathy. All techniques we use need to be rooted in these simple principles. They need to be shown that they are going to be listened to and supported consistently – not dismissed, and not bounced between different professionals.’

HOW CPs CAN HELP

Emily has some clear advice for community practitioners. ‘The fact that handcuffing is allowed and not monitored means you need to be on the lookout for physical and emotional signs.’

‘Keep an eye out for red marks around a child’s wrist, or be on alert if a child shows resistance or fear when faced with a car journey. Also, please support our campaign and be willing to lend your voice – the more noise we make, the less the government can ignore us,’ she says.

‘The only way to stop this is to enforce legal changes, whether regulatory or legislative. There is a wealth of exceptional and kind professionals working in the welfare system, who want nothing more than to protect and nurture every child under their care.’

‘But there are also unscrupulous private transport providers, who will continue to choose the “easy route” of physical restraint with no consequence – unless it’s either banned or regulated so they have to justify and explain their choices.’

‘This practice is still going on today. It’s just hidden from public view and needs whistleblowers to put their neck on the line and demand change. By restraining children like animals, we’re sending them a message that they don’t matter, and that we don’t care one bit about their feelings – that needs to change.’

► **Support the cause and sign up for campaign updates at serenitywelfare.org/page/hope-instead-of-handcuffs.html**

ABOUT EMILY

- Emily was born in Holloway, London. She began her career as an estate agent and by 31 was a director of a large UK housebuilder.
- She set up Serenity Welfare in 2016 to provide safe, comfortable and secure transport services. The firm has a 100% success rate in ‘stress-free’, compassionate and therapeutic journeys.
- Emily says: ‘The biggest lesson I’ve learnt is how cracks in the system allow so many injustices to take place. To fight these we have to be vigilant, keep our eyes open and never stop questioning.’

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