

# Trainer's notes

## Unit No. 9: Transitions and trajectories

### Unit objectives

- To consider the developmental trajectories of vulnerable children and identify the impact of intervening at various stages
- To understand the importance of providing support at the earliest possible stage
- To identify the important transitions experienced by looked after children
- To explore effective ways of managing and supporting transitions

### Outline of Unit

- Presentation: Developmental Trajectories
- Paired Activity: Personal Transitions
- Presentation: Understanding transitions
- Small group activity: case discussion identifying transitions
- Presentation: managing transitions well in practice
- Small group activity: Making transitions work well
- Video clips: Select from Zachari, Saffron, Zoie, Mandy, Ashley, Tony

### Resources required to deliver unit

Video Clips

### Resources required to support this unit

[NICE guidelines on looked after children](#)

[Listen Up! Adult Care Leavers Speak Out](#) (Duncalf 2010)

[http://www.youngminds.org.uk/training\\_services/training\\_and\\_consultancy/schools/wellbeing/transitions](http://www.youngminds.org.uk/training_services/training_and_consultancy/schools/wellbeing/transitions)<http://www.nurturegroups.org/>

<http://www.rootsofempathy.org/>

[Scottish Government research report and guide re the looked after children educational attainment pilots](#)

### Introduction to trainer

This unit focuses on two interconnected topics. Initially it examines the idea of developmental trajectories focusing particularly on education. There are numerous anecdotal accounts that early years workers are able to identify those children who will be failing in school and/or in serious trouble in their

adolescence and young adulthood. Research has to some extent backed this up and a number of longitudinal studies have helped to identify both the factors in early life that are associated with difficulties later and also positive interventions that appear to have persisting effects across several years of children's lives.

Good transition management for looked after children is particularly important in ensuring that their development is not adversely affected by the multiple changes they may experience. Most of this part of the unit focuses on children who are looked after away from home who invariably experience at least one life changing transition and often many more. Many children who are looked after at home, however, may also experience numerous changes of caretaker, living environment or school as a result of complicated or chaotic family experiences.

#### Presentation and discussion: Developmental Trajectories (20 minutes)

Use the PowerPoint slides (1-14) to develop a presentation on the importance of thinking about developmental trajectories when working with looked after children. You should emphasise that you are not suggesting that once children arrive at school their destiny is already fixed. You should, however, emphasise that altering such trajectories become much more difficult and resource intensive the older children become.

The Dunedin study is a longitudinal study taking place in New Zealand which has had very high retention rates so its figures are likely to be reliable. Other studies across the world have also identified different developmental trajectories to do with violence and delinquency. They show that most children peak in their aggression between the age of 2 and 3 and this gradually diminishes over their childhood. In other words violence is unlearned not learned. The quality of the relationship with parents, particularly mothers, seems to be associated with this reduction in aggression. Children vary in their initial level of aggression with some children never being aggressive and others displaying varying levels of aggression from low to high. Each of the studies identified a small group of children with high levels of aggression at the age of 2 which does not diminish over the subsequent years. These children are most likely to have very young mothers and poor attachments.

Adverse home environments are also associated with poor educational performance. Poverty alone can profoundly affect the trajectory of educational achievement so that by the age of six the less able children of parents with a high socio-economic status have overtaken more able children from impoverished backgrounds. Many looked after children come from families in poverty but they can also have a history of chaotic parenting and poor attachments. Remind participants of the information in the unit on Pre and Post Care Experiences. There is good evidence that parenting programmes and high quality pre-school education can have enduring effects in improving outcomes for children.

Draw participants' attention to the slide showing the level of public spending on children and young people's education at various life stages and compare this with the graph showing the return for investment at the same stages. Use the two slides on the attainment of looked after children to demonstrate the disturbing educational trajectory of looked after children. Although the figures on attainment show looked after children achieving less well on average than their peers from very early in their school careers, the gap is widening by the end of S2. We know that the figures become even more concerning as young people approach their formal examinations and by the time they leave school only about 6% will move directly into higher education compared with almost 50% of other young people.

Recent research conducted by the Care Leavers Association *Listen Up!* (Duncalf 2010), however, suggests that for many care leavers this dismal picture reflects a particular point on their developmental trajectory. In this study care leavers over the age of forty showed substantial increases in educational qualifications, ranging from GCSEs to degrees and post-graduate qualifications. This is an important and hopeful piece of research as it shows that many adult care leavers are capable of considerable achievements even if their experiences of moving into independence were poor. It also, however, highlights the negative and inadequate provision of services encountered by many young care leavers.

This presentation focuses on the big picture and raises policy issues. Remind participants, however, that these ideas can also be very useful in direct practice. The final slides in this section describe real experiences. They highlight the fact that individual relationships, interactions or responses can have the effect of helping a child make a small change in direction. A small shift in direction at the age of five, ten or fifteen can make a major difference to outcomes several years later. This is particularly true for interventions that provide children with opportunities to develop secure attachments and/or recover from trauma. Teachers and carers may not see the impact of the effort they put in to their work with looked after children but that does not mean that it has none. Many adults who were looked after as children can identify particular relationships or even specific interactions that they believe transformed their lives.

Throughout the presentation engage participants in discussion and emphasise that there are good examples of interventions that can change developmental trajectories beyond the early years' stage. Many people will know about nurture groups and emotional literacy programmes. Another interesting programme from Canada is the Roots of Empathy programme which seems to show good results across the primary school years and is beginning to expand outside Canada.

Paired Activity: Personal Transitions (20 mins)

Ask the participants to consider the following questions individually and note down their answers.

Think of a time when you changed job:

- What were some of the feelings that the change evoked in you?
- What sort of physical and psychological responses did you have?
- Were your existing skills sufficient or did you have to acquire new ones? If so where and how were you able to do this?"

After five minutes ask participants to share their responses briefly with another member of the group, noting similarities and differences. After another five minutes ask for feedback to the whole group. Record answers on a flip chart.

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The purpose of this activity is to get participants in touch with the powerful impact of change on their lives. There are likely to be a wide range of emotions and experiences recounted. Many will be positive, but almost everyone will also acknowledge anxiety, apprehension or even outright terror. In most new jobs there is a period of deskilling which makes us feel less competent and affects our functioning.

Emphasise that even for well-resourced adults, change can have a negative as well as a positive effect. Most participants will have had some choice about their new job. Even though this can be helpful it does not prevent all the negative effects. There may be physiological changes arising from anxiety that affect our functioning and make us feel uncomfortable. In particular we may become hyper-vigilant, more aware of own and other people's reactions and responses. The more changes we have to deal with simultaneously the more difficult it can be to cope. Having to move house as well as job, for example, increases the stress experienced. Inherent in every change is a degree of loss and this can affect us unexpectedly even are enjoying the positive gains of a new situation.

Remind participants that children looked after away from home experience many changes, moving from one care environment to another, adjusting to new adults and/or other children, as well as having to participate in a learning environment. When adults embark on change, there are often supportive networks of family/friends to discuss things with and other things that remain constant. This is not always available to children. The physiological impact of loss and change may quite literally make it difficult for children and young people to hear and see what is going on around them and to respond appropriately.

Even if children are looked after away from home to protect them, they have not only been removed from the abuser. They have also left familiar and possibly supportive family members, often including siblings. You should emphasise that, wherever possible, children should be maintained in the same school when they become looked after away from home even if this means travelling some distance. Continuity of schooling can be extremely reassuring, and provide continuity in relationships, at a time when a great deal of change is taking place in other aspects of a child's life.

Presentation: Understanding transitions (10 mins)

Construct a presentation about transitions using the PowerPoint slides (16-25). Ensure that participants recognise the difficulty of transitions for many looked after children but also that helping a child to manage a transition successfully can increase their resilience and make future transitions easier. Highlight the fact that looked after children experience difficulty with transitions for reasons other than the disabling effects of their backgrounds. The quantity and nature of transitions that many looked after children have to manage would leave most adults unable to cope. This becomes particularly acute as young people move into adulthood and support is reduced for them at the point where they have to face numerous challenges. This is explored in more detail in the unit *Leaving Care Well*.

It is also important to remind participants that children who are looked after away from home often experience a number of transitions on a day to day basis that can be very unsettling. Children in residential care for example have to cope with changes in shifts, staff holidays, staff or other children arriving or leaving, family contact etc. Children in foster care do not have so much turmoil built in to their living experience but they too have the complexity of balancing their family contact and their daily life in the foster home. The increased intensity of living in a family may make the contrasts and conflict of loyalty even starker than for children living in residential environments.

Small group activity: case discussion identifying transitions (20 mins including feedback)

In professionally mixed groups ask for a volunteer to present the history of a looked after child that they know well, focusing on the transitions they have experienced. Emphasise that the task is not to describe the quality of parenting or care that a child has received, just the amount of change in their lives. Remind participants that changes in the adults centrally involved in a child's life are transitions even if the child remains in the same living environment. Participants should categorise the transitions into those that are developmentally driven (such as starting school), those that are to do with family factors, those that are to do with the wider systems involved with the child and those that are to do with the child directly. They should try to identify significant losses and gains at each transition point.

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When participants have completed the activity ask for feedback. It is likely that participants will identify that most transitions in looked after children's lives are outside the children's control. Some changes in the lives of older children may come about as a result of their difficult behaviour but this is usually built upon a history of many difficult and abrupt changes earlier in their lives. It is important to contrast this experience of multiple changes across a range of dimensions

with the relative stability of most children. Point out that change and transition of themselves are not destructive and indeed can often signal exciting new opportunities but this may require internal and external resources such as self-esteem or a strong support system that are not always available to looked after children.

Presentation: managing transitions well in practice (10 mins)

Use the PowerPoint slides to create a presentation outlining effective ways of supporting children through transitions. It would be useful to look at the NICE guidelines as some of the recommendations make it very clear that maintenance of good relationships after children have left a particular placement is very important. There may be some resistance among participants to this idea as policies and practice do not always support this. Emphasise that the guidelines have been compiled by the National Institute for Clinical Excellence and the Social Care Institute for Excellence and as such represent best evidence supported practice. The *Transitions* page from the YoungMinds website is also helpful for identifying good practice in education settings and may be useful printed out as a hand-out.

Make sure to draw on some examples of good practice. The Scottish Government research on the educational pilots identified that management of transitions was a key theme addressed by many of the pilot authorities. Brief descriptions of all the projects are available in the research report – a copy is contained within these training materials. It may be helpful, dependent on your participants, to show clips from the video of Liz talking about supporting transitions from nursery to primary school for children looked after at home. She describes acting as a bridge between the different people involved with the child as well as providing a direct link for the child during this transition. You should also attempt to find local examples of good practice where possible.

Small group activity: Making transitions work well (15 minutes)

Ask participants to return to their small groups and focus on the same child. Ask them to answer these questions:

- What transitions does this child experience on a daily/weekly basis?
- What predictable transitions are there in the near future?
- What plans are in place to help this child cope with these transitions?
- Are there any contingency plans for unexpected disruptions?
- Could they be improved?

Notes to trainer

Emphasise that you are not looking for a regurgitation of current care plans or educational plans but that the work they do in the group should inform future

planning. Participants should be stretching themselves to think creatively and innovatively about the transitions they are discussing. Encourage them to use their capacity for empathy to really understand what these transitions might make the child feel, particularly in the context of the child's history. What might help this individual child at this time?

#### Video clips:

Finish the session by showing one or more video clips. Select from Zachari, Saffron, Zoie, Mandy, Ashley, Tony. In each case, the young adults with a looked-after background talk about transitions in their lives, barriers they faced and the people who supported them. If time permits, engage in discussion about issues stimulated by the films.

#### Key Messages

- There is growing evidence that children at risk of educational failure or anti- social behaviour can be identified at a very early age
- Interventions in the early years through high quality pre-school and parenting projects have persisting positive effects
- Supportive interventions are more effective and cost less the earlier they occur
- Many looked after children underachieve throughout their school career but the gap between these children and their peers tends to widen over time.
- Some adult care leavers are able to make significant educational progress and achieve high educational qualifications in adulthood.
- Looked after children often experience multiple, abrupt transitions. The number and quality of such transitions would overwhelm most adults.
- There are helpful strategies for managing transitions whether these are planned or unplanned.
- Looked after children experience potentially destabilising transitions within their daily routines which need careful management.
- Helping children to manage transitions successfully helps build their resilience.