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| **Unit No. 10** | ***The looked after child’s world*** |
| **Unit objectives**   * To highlight the impact of their home environment on looked after children’s capacity to participate fully in school activities. * To consider the range and impact of different care settings. | |
| **Outline of Unit**   * Introductory activity * Changing Lives * In their own words (Hand-out and film) * Video clip | |
| **Introduction**  This unit is specifically for education staff (i.e. teachers, educational psychologists, classroom assistants, etc.) and is to help them to understand something of the experience of looked after children and how this might affect their learning and behaviour in school. Although it discusses all looked after children most of the unit is concerned with children looked after away from home as there are commonalities in the experience of children who are looked after in foster, residential and kinship care placements that can be explored. Emphasise that for children who are looked after at home education staff must be aware that their family experiences and home background are diverse. It is also important to emphasise that the care trajectory for many looked after children will include experiences of a variety of care settings (both at home and away from home). In supporting these children’s education, education staff should respond to every child’s individual circumstances. | |

**Introductory Activity**

Reflect on your professional experience. What qualities and attributes do you most like to see in the children that you work with. When you have created your list, produce another list describing the factors in the child’s home environment that you believe are most likely to create or maintain such qualities.

You might well have included qualities and attributes such as respect, politeness, a capacity to listen, attentiveness, concentration, interest, hard work, punctuality, organisational skills, warmth, mutuality, appropriate fun, good humour, concern for others and high aspirations.

In identifying the home factors that support such qualities you probably included factors such as good early experiences, positive adult-child relationships, strong values in the home, safety and security, interest in learning and education, available adults and clear boundaries.

There is a lack of most of these experiences for many looked after children. Those who are looked after at home may be still struggling on a daily basis with chaotic lifestyles and getting to school at all may be an extraordinary achievement. Remember that secure attachments are very important for children to be able to engage in learning and the adverse impact of trauma on children’s capacity to manage school. Even those children who are now looked after away from home are often are dealing with the legacy of traumatic events or failed attachments. They may also continue to worry about their parents or siblings at home. In addition being cared for away from your own family is in itself disturbing and difficult no matter how adverse the home situation may have been or how loving and thoughtful new carers are.

**Activity - Changing lives**

For the next activity you will require the help of a friend or colleague but not somebody you share a home with. Ask them to write down in detail their morning routine from the moment they get up until the time they leave the house for the day. Ask them to include a fair amount of detail for example such detail as what they ate and who else would be with them.

Try to imagine that you are now expected to live by this person’s routine. What feelings does this prospect evoke in you?

This activity is designed to reinforce some of the learning provided by earlier activities in the unit ***Transitions and Trajectories*** which deals with change and managing new situations. Having to interpret unfamiliar behaviour and signals can be demanding and anxiety provoking.

It is important to remember that when children become looked after away from home, they leave behind everything that is familiar: home, people, routines (or lack of routines), the neighbourhood etc. The previous activity will have shown the impact of such change on emotional and physical functioning but change also impacts on a child’s sense of self-identity. The routines and rhythms of where we live reinforce our feeling of belonging, of predictability and provide a secure base from which to operate. The absence of a secure base, or a changing base, means that children often lack these essential supports.

Moving into a foster, kinship or residential placement may provide a child with a safer environment than they were living in previously, or a more stimulating and ordered setting, but adjusting to new routines, becoming the youngest in a household when you have been the oldest, becoming the only boy, the only black child, sharing a room with someone strange all have an impact on a child’s sense of self.

In residential units, routines and expectations are likely to be set out so that a child knows what is happening. Sometimes, however, the mix of troubled children means that it is hard for staff to maintain routines. In foster placements the routines are not usually formalised adding to the sense of discomfort about what is expected of the children.

Schools can help in a number of ways when a child moves home, particularly if the child remains in the same school, by ensuring that information is made available to new carers about timetables, equipment, clothing etc. If a child has to move school, it is important to provide clarity about school routines, expectations and any buddy systems so that the child entering the school does not always have to ask questions

Becoming looked after at home may also lead to dramatic changes in routine, if part of the intervention involves direct support in creating greater order in a chaotic household. Although children may ultimately benefit and gain security from a more ordered, predictable environment, initially at least, it can lead to discomfort and distress. Some children may also be very protective of their parents and resent any changes “imposed” on the family as a result of them becoming looked after.

**‘In their own words’ (Video and hand-out)**

**Who Cares? Scotland video**

This film was made by children themselves for presentation at the 2008 Scottish Institute for Residential Child Care (SIRCC) National Conference.

Read the hand-out. This is composed of quotations from a number of reports that describe children’s lives in the looked after system. They are all direct comments and thoughts from children.

What are your reactions to the kind of experiences the children are describing in the film and the hand-out? Think about the looked after children in your work place – do you know which children are looked after at home and which are looked after in residential, kinship or foster care? Does reading the hand-out give you greater insight into some of the behaviour, attitudes or relationships you have observed? Obviously it would be inappropriate to initiate discussion about their living situations with these children. It might, however, be worth making contact with the designated manager for education at your local children’s units or a relevant social work colleague and find out more about the kind of environments the children are living in.

The following video clips show some of the pressures that might exist in children’s living environments and how these can impinge directly on school life and achievement.

**Video Clips: From the Learning with Care video. LWC 1 & LWC 2**

This highlights the difficulties that can occur in residential units and reinforces the message that communication between the adults is vital, because children are not always able to speak up for themselves about what is going on. It is important to note that these video clips are now quite old and that the references to the curriculum, for example, are now out of date. However, the messages about ‘life in care’ and ‘at school in care’ remain valid. **51**