

Self-study notes

Unit No.13: Making it better in the home setting

Unit objectives

- To identify ways in which the home environment can support and sustain children and at school.
- To consider strategies to develop a supportive and educationally rich environment in the home.

Outline of Unit

- Introduction
- Introductory activity: "Who or what supported your learning?"
- The influence of the home setting
- What carers and social workers can do.

Introduction

This unit is aimed at foster carers, kinship carers, residential workers and social workers. The purpose of the unit is to help you work out ways to increase the amount and quality of the support you offer to children to help them in their education.

Introductory activity: What or who supported our learning?

Spend a few moments reflecting on your own experiences of school and the factors that helped keep you interested and involved.

Your list may well have included some of the following:

- High expectations from parents and other family members
- One or two subjects that particularly interested you or in which you were successful
- Praise for trying as well as succeeding
- A particular teacher who encouraged you
- A family culture of learning
- Threat of sanctions if you failed to attend
- Peer group support.

Are there any of these factors that you can build in for the looked after children you care for?

The influence of the home setting

Look at PowerPoint slides 1-10. The evidence is clear that the experiences of children when they are at home affect how well they will achieve educationally. The comments of the children themselves reinforce how important their carers have been in their educational success. Foster carers, kinship carers, residential staff and social workers already do a tremendous amount to support the learning of the children. It has to be recognised, however, that at times the numbers of children in placement and the complexities of their behaviours contribute to carers feeling under pressure and somewhat overwhelmed. Likewise, social workers may feel their case loads are too high for them to give sufficient attention to, or the educational support that they would like to provide for looked after children whether they are living at home or away from home. Despite these pressures it is very clear that the significance of providing good home support for looked after children's education and an educationally rich and stimulating environment cannot be underestimated.

What can you do to use existing routines to help with learning or be creative about developing others?

Video clips:

Debbie Booth (foster carer)

John Borland (unit manager)

John and Debbie both have a passionate commitment to improving the educational experience of the children they care for. Their ideas are a useful starting point for the next section of the unit.

What carers and social workers can do

Read the hand-out "What carers and social workers can do".

This is a brief summary of some of the ways in which adults responsible for the care of looked after children can create a really rich educational experience. There are other hand-outs included that are not specific to carers of looked after children but which may also help you to think about creative ways to support the children you care for.

You should be clear of the importance of talking to younger children about their learning, reading with and to children and incorporating basic mathematical ideas into their everyday lives. Remember too that the first three years of life lay down the building blocks of learning. If you are caring for very small children you should understand that the quality of your interaction with them can have long term effects on their engagement in learning and educational attainment. Reading to babies and infants can be the start of a lifelong involvement with books. Encouraging imaginative play, introducing the idea of sequencing through playing number games or helping children develop skill in sports, all build

competencies that will be very useful in a formal learning environment as well as being fun for both you and the child.

You may not have detailed knowledge of the subjects being studied by older children, but there is much you can do to build confidence and self-esteem in them. This can be by taking an interest in their work, by looking out for and praising achievements, identifying others who might have skills and knowledge they can tap into, or by giving children an opportunity to practise and rehearse some of the activities they will be expected to perform at school. Even older children may be happy to listen to stories or read books with their carers if this is offered sensitively. It is important to remember that a significant number of children will not become engaged with reading through enjoyment. Reading does, however, remain an essential skill for successful adult life. If children are not enthused by reading for the intrinsic enjoyment it brings then you need to find different ways of encouraging reading. It is important to be able to demonstrate the functionality of reading. If a child can gain something or find out something interesting through reading they are more likely to develop fluency than if it remains a chore imposed by teachers.

You may feel anxious about understanding some of the curriculum; for instance the children's knowledge and skill in maths or computing may outstrip yours. You need to remember, however, that support is not about "knowing answers to homework questions". It is about providing encouragement and a home environment that is conducive to learning. It is not just children who are looked after away from home who need the support of their carers. Most children find some subjects at school difficult and the completion of homework is an issue for many households. You may, have concerns about whether your budgets or allowances are sufficient to provide all the identified support. Many of the suggested strategies are free or not costly but, if necessary, consider how you might advocate for change.

Education Scotland's [Parentzone](#) provides numerous resources aimed at how parents and carers can better support learning at home. The leaflet "Making the Most of Time with Your Child" offers ideas for enjoyable experiences to share that will enhance learning in many ways.

It is also essential that carers and social workers work in partnership and establish together the type of support you can and will provide.

If you are working in residential care then you should look at the hand-out on the role of the designated manager responsible for education within residential units. This is a new role which should be very helpful in maintaining an appropriate focus on education. It emphasises both the importance of the educational richness of the home setting but also the need for close working with schools. Partnership and good communication between carers and school are essential for looked after children to do well in their education.

For more information about how schools assess excellence, refer to Education Scotland's Journey to Excellence website www.journeytoexcellence.org.uk.

What kind of intelligence?

Look at slide 11 .This highlights some of the different kinds of intelligence that exist. People are often good at different aspects of learning. It is important to note all the different dimensions of cleverness and to seek ways of identifying where a child is clever, to build on this and to create opportunities to develop skills in other areas. For instance, children who have had adverse experiences may have developed skills in 'reading other people' but conversely trauma may have inhibited their learning/cleverness in other areas, so they may be clumsy and out of touch with their body.

Think of the children you work with. What kinds of intelligence are their particular strengths? Is this recognised and celebrated or do adults around them only concentrate on traditional views of intelligence? Obviously basic numeracy and literacy are essential life skills but helping children to recognise and develop their strengths in other areas is also important.

Activity: Core skills

The purpose of this activity is to help you explore ways to help the children you care for to develop the core skills which underpin their educational experience. This is not intended to be a school like experience for children. Children who do well at school are often those whose carers /parents have been able to maintain a sense that learning can be fun. As has already been highlighted much of the difference in educational attainment among children is to do with the experiences they have in their home environments. This activity should help you realise that almost every daily experience can provide opportunities for children to develop and practise these skills.

Read "The Core Skills" hand-out and then complete the following task. Look at slide 12 which gives a real example of the type of activity that might be suitable.

1. Think about the particular difficulties looked after children may experience in managing to develop these skills. Your responses might range from a child not having had a stable enough school experience to develop basic numeracy or literacy skills through to being unable to tolerate being part of a group or being too wound up to sustain concentrated effort on any subject.
2. Design a shared activity for the children and adults you work with that will help the children to develop and practise these skills in their home environment. The group of children should preferably be of different ages and different ability levels. The activity should require involvement over a period of time. It should include research, planning, communication, implementation and evaluation. It must also be an experience the children would value and enjoy.
3. Make sure you identify the potential learning opportunities for children and some of the difficulties that they may experience in undertaking the task. Try and develop strategies to overcome these difficulties. If necessary

identify any additional resources required for you to create such opportunities.

4. Develop a written plan for this activity. This should include specific detail about how individual young people might develop and enhance their skills across the five areas. Discuss this with the other adults who might be involved and work out how to implement it in practice.