

# Self-study notes

## Unit No. 16: Leaving Care Well

### Unit objectives

- To recognise the importance of the transition out of care whenever it occurs
- To recognise the importance of stable secure care and continuing relationships into adulthood
- To examine the outcomes for young people leaving care
- To identify the factors that make the move into adulthood particularly challenging for care leavers
- To recognise what factors can make a difference for young people leaving care.
- To explore effective planning, support systems and strategies for making the process of leaving care positive.
- To enable and encourage participants to reflect on their own journey to independence and make **meaningful** connections and comparisons with care leavers experiences, to better contextualise the issues/challenges faced.
- To promote the concept of corporate parenting through the leaving care transition into adulthood.

### Outline of Unit

- Children leave care at any age!
- What are the issues?
- Planning and strategies for improvement
- Video clips
- Activity: Improving practice

### Introduction

Welcome to the Leaving Care Well unit. The main focus of this unit is young people leaving care and moving into adulthood. A wide range of issues face young people who are leaving care to become independent. This is acknowledged within the unit but for this course the emphasis is on continuing care, accommodation, relationships, education, training and work.

This unit relates back to the Transitions and Trajectories Unit and participants should be reminded of the issues that were covered in that unit.

## **Presentation and discussion: Children leave care at any age! (10 minutes)**

Although the main focus of policy and practice is often on young people leaving care to become independent, it is also important to be aware that children can leave the looked after system at any age and to a variety of destinations. Some children are looked after for only a matter of days while others spend all or most of their childhood being looked after by the local authority.

- What do you think the impact is on children and young people who experience periods of being looked after?
- What practical things do you think **you** can do to help children cope with this transition?

These transitions are very important and making them a success is not just the responsibility of social workers or carers.

Educational professionals, such as teachers or early years workers, involved with these children need to be aware of the significance of such transitions and be proactive in providing support before during and after any move or change. They can be very important in maintaining security, stability and safety for children during and after these transitions.

- Children and young people do not always leave care post-16. Many experience transitions back home from temporary care settings at a younger age.
- It is important for these children to experience as little disruption in other key areas of their lives at these times.
- Maintaining consistent school placements, key relationships, access to hobbies, clubs and friends is crucial in maintaining a sense of control and normality to counter the emotional vulnerability many can experience.
- It is important for looked after children whatever their age and stage, to receive consistent positive messages and support regarding their education and academic potential, and for all staff to have high aspirations for them.
- The importance of stability and consistency for looked after children cannot be over-estimated; and next to family, schools are the single most important constant for children. A connectedness to school, regardless of academic ability or attainment is a vital protective factor for children and young people. The importance of a "sense of belonging" is particularly crucial for looked after children, and school/college staff and educational settings should aim to help looked after children belong and feel connected to their school.

## Timeline activity

Think about your own life between the ages of 15 and 26. Create a timeline highlighting the events and experiences that marked your transition to adulthood and full independence.

Consider the following aspects of your own journey to independence.

- At what age did you leave home?
- Was this planned or in a crisis – did you have choice over when you left and where you went?
- Did you move onto college or university – for example into halls of residence or sharing student flat with friends; or move into your first home with a new life partner eg getting married
- If you went off to college or University, did you/could you go home at holiday time?
- How sure were you that if it all went wrong you could go home – did you ever do this?
- What mistakes did you make? How were these resolved?
- How did you manage your money – did your parents/family help with your living costs & expenses? How was this negotiated and managed? What about the “bank of mum& dad”?
- How did you feel? Excited, scared, lonely, abandoned, happy, confident, optimistic - what was your emotional journey like, and where did you get your emotional support?
- Did you feel ready to move out to independence?
- What about key people who supported you – immediate/extended family, friends, college tutors, work place colleagues...?
- Who could you turn to when you got stuck?
- Who were the relationships you could rely on for emotional support?
- How easy would it have been for you if you did not have the support of family or friends?

Reflecting on your own experience and journey, how might these contrast with young people with a care background?

The purpose of this activity is to highlight that for most people the transition to adulthood and independence is spread over several years. Although the age of legal capacity is 16 in Scotland there are a number of other legal milestones that mark a young person’s emerging adulthood. Most people achieve independence through a series of steps, none of which alone marks a clear moment of becoming an adult. Some people feel that they only truly became adults when they have their own children which may not happen until well beyond the age of

25. This is in marked contrast to the experience of the majority of looked after children who are still expected to become independent much earlier than most of their peers. You may have left home very early yourself or you may have stayed at home until well into your twenties. Early independence is not of itself a route to failure. There are numerous young people who left care at 16 and are leading very successful lives. There is, however, an increased risk of poor outcomes associated with leaving care at 16. As well as leaving "home" early young care leavers do not have the option to return if their move does not turn out well. They do not have someone to bring their laundry home to, cadge a meal off or "borrow" ten pounds from to see them through the weekend. Most young people can try out their independence at a rate that suits them and are certain that a safety net is there for them for as long as is needed. This is the normal transition to adulthood in our culture. For most looked after young people the move in to independence is more abrupt and more final.

- Ongoing practical support is important; but the **social and emotional journey to independence is often much more challenging.**
- **Leaving care should be seen as a life process, and not a bureaucratic event.**
- Whilst there are exceptions to every rule, generally care leavers move to independence much earlier, more abruptly and much less prepared and supported than their peers.

There are many very good leaving care schemes and committed practitioners who are able to offer practical and emotional support to care leavers but ultimately looked after children have to face a very different and more threatening process of leaving home than most of their peers.

### **What are the issues?**

Download the PowerPoint slides

Look at slides 3-23

The slides build on the activity above by underlining both the difference in experience of young care leavers from most of their peers and the relative lack of resources, external and internal, with which they face the move into adulthood. The slides draw on a range of research publications on care leavers. The first three slides make the point that care leavers are expected to become independent much earlier and in a more accelerated fashion than their peers.

The Sweet 16? Report (2008) emphasised the perceived pressure on looked after young people, particularly in residential care, to leave the system when they are 16.

Statistical information from the Scottish Government emphasises the instability of accommodation and the high number of young people not engaged in any economic activity.

Research informs that the single most important factor in improving outcomes for care leavers is the age at which they leave care. As a consequence, recent policy and legislative changes have offered new opportunities to address that issue.

The 'Staying Put Scotland' Guidance (Scot Govt, 2013) sets out the principles and philosophy of care which expects all looked after young people to be 'encouraged, enabled and empowered' to stay put in a stable care placement until they are **ready** to move. And when they do move on to more 'interdependent living' they should do so in a more graduated and extended manner, avoiding the often abrupt and accelerated bureaucratic transition that too many experience.

Part 11 (Continuing Care) of the Children & Young People (Scot) Act 2014 now places **duties** on local authorities to enable looked after young people, who cease to be looked after, after their 16<sup>th</sup> birthday, to effectively 'stay put' in stable care placement up to the age of 21. Whilst there are some caveats to this, the general expectation both in guidance and law, is that no looked after young person should leave care before they are 18 years old, and they should be encouraged enabled and empowered to stay put until they are ready, with duties to provide this up until the age of 21.

Disabled young people face even greater disadvantages in engaging in economic activity than other care leavers. Although care leavers are over represented in a number of groups that are socially excluded and under-represented in the higher education system, it is important to remember that this is not inevitable and that effective targeted support can change this. All professionals involved with looked after children as they approach adulthood have a responsibility to ensure that they receive the support necessary to negotiate the transition as well as possible. Carers, social workers and teachers can all affect this process positively.

Spend a few moments thinking about what might improve outcomes for young care leavers, Concentrate mainly on education and employment but remember to think across the entire age span.

- Whilst it is important to consider and ensure practical support to prepare and support young people moving to independence, the issue of **emotional support** and emotional resilience is often central to sustaining successful transitions. This is what care leavers tell us.
- What do you think helped them make successful transitions?

You might have identified a number of policy initiatives that could help. These might have included ideas such as much earlier interventions to support struggling families, targeted timely support for looked after children who are falling behind educationally, an increased awareness among policy makers of the importance of babyhood, practical help to obtain and retain employment for care leavers or a determination to increase the stability of school and care placements. You may well have identified many more.

Remember, however that we need to consider individual good practice as well as policy responses. Many young people identify the support and commitment from individual adults as particularly important in achieving their aspirations.

The importance of relationship-based practice and positive connection and belonging for looked after young people is particularly important at points of transition, and especially so when they transition from care settings to adulthood and independence. It may be better to think of the term 'interdependence' rather than 'independence' as the importance of positive support networks - family, friends, colleagues, neighbours, teachers - is central to the wellbeing of us all. The 'Making Not Breaking' Report (Care Inquiry, 2013) highlights the importance relationship-based practice as 'the golden thread', and of continuing relationships for care experience children and young people. The Relationships Matter website offers a range of resources and practice examples.

### **Planning and strategies for improvement**

Look at the PowerPoint slides 24-33 These provide a brief introduction to the responsibilities of Local Authorities to care leavers and also to the Pathways planning process. The slides are supplemented by a number of crucial documents in the handouts and supporting resources sections. There has been a sustained attempt to improve the experience of care leavers in the last few years.

The most critical and important changes are those contained within Parts 9 (Corporate Parenting), 10 (Aftercare) and 11 (Continuing Care) of the Children & Young People (Scot) Act, 2014.

The 2014 Act changed the legal definition of a 'care leaver'. From April 2015 any young person who ceased to be looked after on or after their 16<sup>th</sup> birthday will be classified as a 'care leaver'. (The previous definition restricted the category of 'care leaver' to young people who ceased to be looked after beyond their minimum school leaving age.)

Corporate Parenting duties are extended to a range of public bodies, who now have a range of legal responsibilities under Part 10 of the Act to consider and address the needs of looked after children, young people and care leavers.

Aftercare support to care leavers has now been extended up to the age of 26. Whilst this is subject to an assessment and the identification of eligible needs, a care leaver can request an assessment for support and a local authority has a duty to carry out an assessment, and if there are eligible needs identified, to ensure that these needs are met up until their 26<sup>th</sup> birthday. Duties to provide aftercare support extend to all care leavers, regardless of care placement.

Continuing Care' is a new legal term established by the 2014 Act. It means the continued provision of the accommodation (placement) and other assistance that was being provided by the local authority immediately before the young person ceased to be looked after. Please note that this is not a new category of 'looked after'. Young people will have to cease to be looked after (i.e. ending a

supervision requirement or voluntary arrangement) to be eligible. However, this does not mean that potentially eligible young people need to come off Supervision Requirements (or end voluntary arrangements) earlier than planned. If a looked after young person was born on or after 1 April 1999, they become a 'care leaver' in or after April 2015, and their last placement was 'away from home', they will be eligible to 'Continuing Care' whenever they cease to be looked after.

As such, local authorities and other statutory corporate parents have increased duties and powers to provide support for young people and this support can, and should be continued into adulthood, in line with legislation, policy and guidance.

- Research clearly states that, if we delay, or positively extend, the age at which young people exit the care system, and extend the timescales for a supported, graduated transition from care, avoiding abrupt "cliff edge" transitions, then care leavers outcomes and chances for success are greatly enhanced.
- We need to remind ourselves of how we may apply different standards and expectations for care leavers who have often had troubled and traumatic childhoods, and who may lack the practical and life skills, and emotional resilience to successfully make this life changing transition at such a young age and without the consistent, support of family.
- We need to have big aspirations but realistic expectations - and continually ask ourselves: "**would this be good enough for my child**"?

A looked after child or young person should have a Childs Plan up until the age of 18. There is also a clear requirement on Local Authorities to develop plans with young people to help them negotiate the path to adulthood successfully such as a Pathways or Transition plan which assesses and addresses supports needs into adulthood. You should consider how the principles of GIRFEC and the SHANARRI well-being indicators apply for care leavers and how these may relate to and inform Pathways and transitions planning into adulthood. Despite these requirements not all care leavers yet have a Pathways plan in place when they leave care, some young people become homeless very quickly after leaving care and many care leavers are not in employment, education or training. It would be important to read all the handouts associated with this unit as they give a flavour of the main issues. If you have time or are interested to explore this topic further then it would be very helpful to have a look at the more substantial documents included in the supporting resources section. This includes a blank copy of the Pathways Plan and the handbook that outlines the procedure. There are also a number of policy documents and research reports which are very interesting. Reading the Executive Summary of these will usually give you the main points very quickly and you can then read any section that is of particular interest. The two websites also have some excellent resources available to download.

The final slides look at factors that are associated with successful transitions to adulthood for young care leavers. Obviously the support available after a young

person leaves care is crucial but it is equally important that adults working with looked after children, of whatever age, are aware that what they do with them and how they relate to them can have an impact well into their adult life. You can see from the slide that many of the most important factors are to do with education. The final quote from the young person sums up clearly that the care leaving process should be about helping young people find the way to fulfil their hopes and aspirations

- There are clear links between stable and supportive accommodation and its influence and impact of the ability to engage with and sustain education, training or employment opportunities.

### **Video clips**

Select one or more clips from Mandy, Saffron, Tony, Zoie (young adults) and Ian & Ros (workers). What things appeared to help the young people to achieve success in their movement towards adulthood? What barriers or constraints existed? What were the important differences in their experiences? What factors were most important in the work described by the two workers?

**Activity:** Improving practice

Thinking about the video clips and the last few slides, spend some time trying to identify what you and others in your profession could do to improve the long term outcomes for looked after children with whom you work

- **Relationships count:** being that person who stops and listens, who takes a genuine interest, who goes the extra mile, who “believes” and who actively promotes a positive culture of care.
- The power of individual relationships – someone, somewhere made a real really positive connection and believed in the young person’s potential and helped them believe in themselves. They did not define them by the label of being a “looked after child” or “care leaver”. Care leavers tell us this can be fundamentally important.
- If emotional resilience and consistent emotional support are crucial to making successful transitions, how do you ensure that care leavers have this?

Distinguish between the policy issues you have identified and examples of practice improvement.

Do you have any ideas about how to influence local policy? Could you achieve more by developing relationships and alliances across agencies and professions? Do you need to collect robust local data to prove your argument?

- What about the concept of Family Firm – does your employer, as a corporate parent, offer dedicated employment opportunities to care leavers
- Does your local college or HE institution hold the Buttle UK Quality Mark?



Did you identify practice changes that you could make yourself? Even if you only work with very young children what you do now may affect their ability to leave care successfully in many years time, Write yourself a list of what you intend to do to help improve the long term outcomes for the children you work with. Put it in an envelope and write a note to yourself in your diary to read it again in three months time. If you have been unable to complete your list work out what has stopped you and try again.