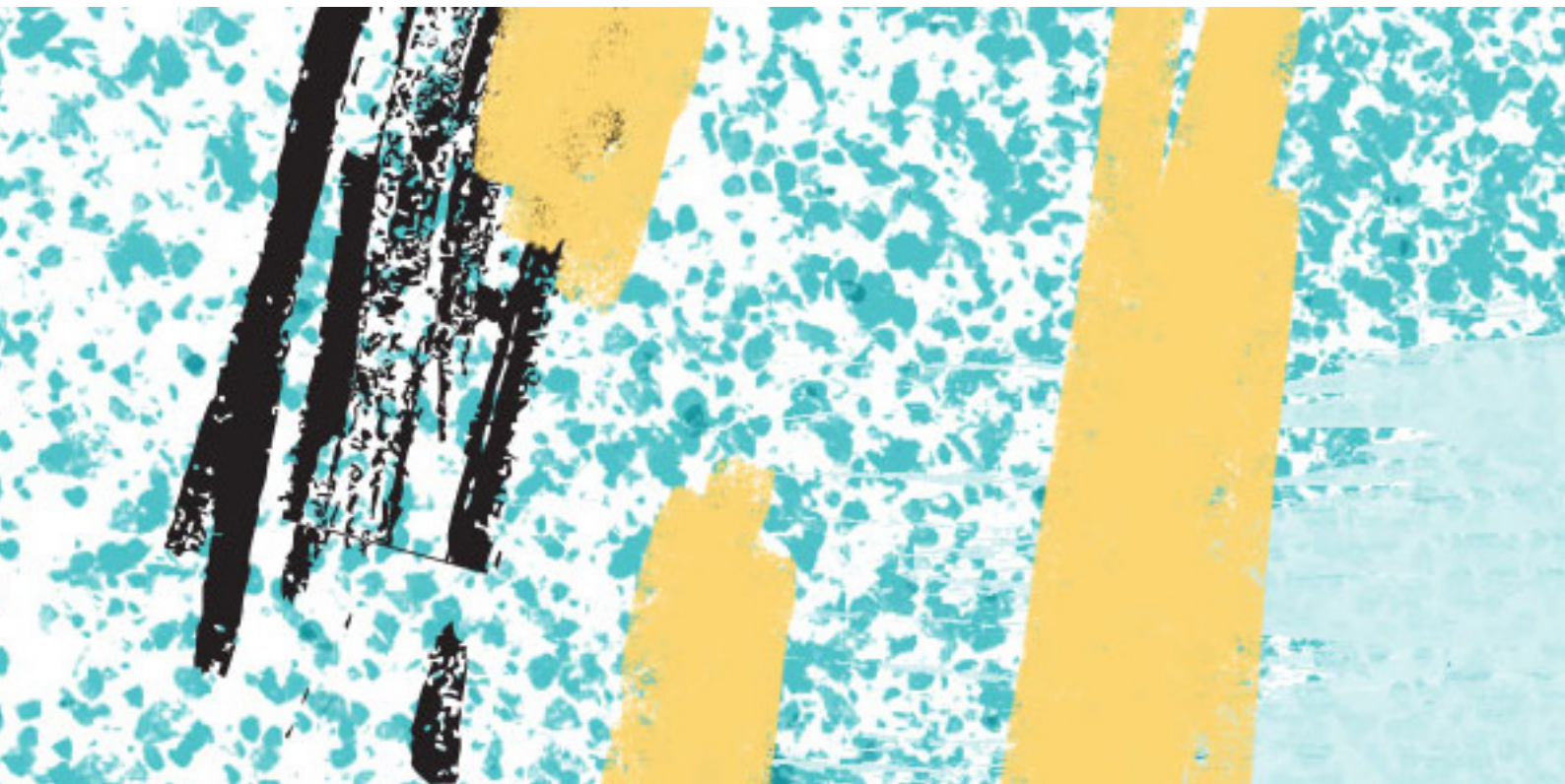


Young care leavers: The need for peer support

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November 2017



Youth Affairs Council Victoria

YACVic is the leading advocate for young people aged 12–25 in Victoria. As a peak body, we work closely with young Victorians and the sector that supports them to deliver effective advocacy, events, training, resources and support – so that young people can live their best lives. We're driven by our valuable members and their vision for a positive future for young Victorians.

YACVic is an independent, not-for-profit organisation with core funding from the Victorian Government's Office for Youth. We pursue social justice by maintaining a focus on those young people in our community who face disadvantage or marginalisation.

We provide additional targeted advocacy and services through our core agencies, YACVic Rural and the Youth Disability Advocacy Service, and proudly auspice and support our partner agencies, the Koorie Youth Council and the Victorian Student Representative Council.

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YACVic respectfully acknowledges the traditional custodians of the Aboriginal nations within Victoria where our work takes place. We pay our respects to Elders both past and present and acknowledge the children and young people of past, current and future generations.



YACVic acknowledges the support of the Victorian Government.

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YACVic Foreword

Young people are at the heart of everything we do at YACVic. Our Young Thinker in Residence (YTiR) program was developed as an innovative way to support young people to choose, lead and promote their own research and advocacy on topics they feel passionate about. Here at YACVic, we recognise young people as the experts on their own lives, and we are committed to strengthening their voices within and outside of our organisation.

The YTiR program employs two young people aged 18-25 for up to 16 weeks, to spend two days a week thinking about a social or political topic of their choosing. They are supported by the YACVic team to develop and publicise a piece of advocacy which can positively impact the issue they are focused on.

It was important to us to support Young Thinkers who have a lived experience of the topics they are working on, and we did not ask for minimum education levels. Through the program, we have connected our Young Thinkers with key stakeholders who share their passions, from academics to youth workers to the Commissioner for Children and Young People.

We were delighted to support the work of Brittany Witnish on the topic of young people leaving out-of-home care in Victoria. Young Victorians leave care at the vulnerable age of 18, and many of them face very serious challenges as they begin their adult lives, including unemployment, poor health and homelessness.

This report has been researched and written by Brittany, with guidance from YACVic and her mentors. In her research, Brittany has focused on something that's not often discussed: the important ways that young people support and strengthen one another. She has argued for a peer support model for young care leavers which would help them to build life skills, personal strengths and social networks and connections to combat isolation and disadvantage and encourage them to pursue their dreams.

Brittany has encouraged us to think more about the capacity young people have to encourage and inspire each other, and the value of connecting with other young people who have a shared understanding of your lived experience.

Abstract

This report explains the leaving care process in Victoria and identifies the gaps in the current leaving care system, particularly around the need for peer support for young care leavers. It contains relevant literature from both overseas and Australia, and the information and contribution from industry professionals, academics and young people. Two key reasons emerged throughout this report as to why peer support and fostering positive peer relationships is important for young care leavers. These two areas included: (1) the importance of building supportive social networks for young care leavers, and (2) addressing the isolation and loneliness that young care leavers face.

Introduction

Young care leavers often face great hardship and disadvantage, both before and long after leaving out-of-home care. Isolation and loneliness have been identified as key issues that young care leavers face. This report has identified that, if ongoing, isolation and loneliness may cause significant and ongoing social, emotional, psychological, and developmental issues for young care leavers. By incorporating a peer support approach into services provided to assist young people leaving care, leaving care service providers can address the isolation and loneliness that young care leavers face by providing them with a supported environment where they can grow their social networks and social skills. This may lead to better long-term life outcomes for young care leavers, and improve young care leavers' overall wellbeing.

Out-of-home care: terminology, processes and issues

For this report, the term ‘young care leavers’ refers to young people aged between 15 and 25 years who have been in care as a child or young person, and are currently – or have previously – transitioned from care into independence.

What is out-of-home care?

Out-of-home care is how the Australian state and territory governments care for a child who is unable to live at home with their family of origin. When a child or young person enters out-of-home care they are often placed on a Care and Protection Order, or if the child or young person is to remain in care until they are 18 years of age, they are placed on a permanent care order. A permanent care order "grants parental responsibility for a child to a person other than the child's parent or the Department of Health & Human Services" (Children's Court of Victoria, 2017). Out-of-home care can also be arranged informally without intervention by courts or statutory authorities (Australian Government, 2017).

In 2016, there were an estimated 46,500 Australian children in out-of-home care (Australian Institute of Family Studies, 2017). The reasons children or young people may enter foster care vary, but often include family conflict, neglect or abuse (emotional, psychological, physical or sexual), or if the family of origin is unable to support the child or young person efficiently. If a child is being neglected or abused, the child may be removed from the family home by child protection and placed into out-of-home care. If a parent can no longer care for their child efficiently, they may contact the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS), or a community service organisation to assist or take over caring responsibilities. The child may then be placed in out-of-home care (State Government of Victoria, 2017).

Children and young people who live in out-of-home care fall under four categories of care placements: foster care, kinship care, permanent care, or residential care (State Government of Victoria, 2017). Children and young people are often subjected to a diverse range of placements during their time in out-of-home care. Out-of-home care placements vary in length, structure, and intensity of care, depending on the child or young person's needs. An out-of-home care placement can last anywhere between a few days to several years. It is not uncommon for children to be placed in many different care placements during their time in out-of-home care.

Leaving care

When a young person living in out-of-home care turns 18 years of age (although sometimes earlier), the young person's care and protection order, or permanent care order finishes. The young person is then required to leave their out-of-home care placement to care for themselves independently. The process of leaving care is commonly termed 'Transitioning from Care'. According to the DHHS (2017), "Each year approximately 500 young people aged 16 to 18 years of age, have their Care by Secretary Order or Long-Term Care Order cease under the Children Youth and Families Act 2005 (section 16) and transition from out-of-home care into independence". Young people leaving care are often referred to as 'young care leavers'. In Victoria, leaving care support and services begin at 16 years of age and end at 21 years of age.

Transitioning from care

In Victoria, current legislation requires that from 15 years of age all young people transitioning from out-of-home care into independence have a 'leaving care plan'. A leaving care plan should contain in detail the supports provided to a young care leaver to assist them until they reach 21 years of age (State of Victoria, 2012). Prior to beginning the transition from care, every young person in out-of-home care should be provided with a care team. A care team is defined as a group of people who care and support the child or young person during their time in out of home care. A care team should always have the child or young person's best interests in mind, and appropriately support their needs (Department of Human Services, 2012). When a young care leaver transitions into independence, the young person goes through stages of planning with their case manager and care team, so that by the time their order is completed, the young person has the means to support themselves efficiently, and will have obtained stable and suitable accommodation.

The three phases of the leaving care process

McDowall (2009) identified three phases of the leaving care process which may present challenges for young care leavers. These phases include: (1) preparation, (2) transition to independences, and (3) after care (also referred to as post-care).

Phase one: Preparation begins when a young person in care reaches fifteen years of age. During this phase, a young person's case manager and care team provide support in areas such as education and the learning of independent living skills.

Phase two: Transition to independence generally begins in conjunction with the preparation phase, depending on the age of the young person in care. During this phase, case managers and care teams assist a young person to obtain and maintain independent accommodation, and to be involved in continuing education or finding employment. Case workers also assist in referring the young person to a leaving care service.

Phase three: After care begins once a young person has transitioned out of care and into independent living. It involves the case manager and care team linking the young person in with safe and sustainable accommodation, education or employment, adequate and sustainable income, and access to health and other specialist services.

In Victoria, the DHHS has attempted to address the issues in each of these phases by providing details of supports needed during each different phase. This information can be found in the *Care and Transition Planning for Leaving Care: Victorian Practice Framework (2012)*. This document, alongside the companion documents – *The Guide to developing 15+ Care and Transition Plans Looking After Children 15+ Care*; and *The Transition Plan form* – is used by case managers and care teams to enable a smoother and more successful transition into independence for young care leavers (Department of Human Services, 2012).

The current leaving care system

On paper, the leaving care plan process should equal a smooth transition from care, but often the transition from out-of-home care is a complicated process. This is due to issues such as the lack of supports available for young care leavers, the lack of planning by case managers or care teams, the lack of financial assistance, and/or the lack of stable and affordable accommodation options available.

Currently, all Australian states and territories are behind on providing appropriate services and effectively responding to the needs of young care leavers. In Victoria, the rate of children and young people in out-of-home care has risen by 62% from 2012-2016 (Rowlands, 2017). Johnson & Mendes (2014) report that "the social and economic costs associated with the failure to provide leaving care and post-care supports to care leavers are significant both for the individuals involved and the broader community" (Johnson, 2014). Over the course of a young care leaver's life, if the young person is unable to successfully transition to independent living, it will cost tax payers up to \$70,000, per young person, as young people must rely significantly on the public health and welfare system (Berry Street, 2016). Although there are many services available to young

care leavers to assist them in their transition from care to independence, there are still many young people who do not transition successfully. The Australian Institute of Family Studies (2016) citing McDowall (2009) state that, "on paper" Australian states and territories appear to be meeting the needs of care leavers through various forms of legislation, policy and funding to support services, yet these "good intentions" were not being translated into actual support for young people (Child Family Community Australia, 2016).

This lack of transition assistance for young care leavers raises the question: *how can services work more effectively to produce better outcomes for young care leavers once they have transitioned out of care?*

The Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (2010) together with the National Framework Implementation Working Group (2009) suggests that "better planning and preparation is needed, as well as improved targeting of existing services to young people with a care experience, to encourage young people to engage with existing services, and the development of more effective referral pathways."

Disadvantages young care leavers face

Research shows that young care leavers may be one of the most disadvantaged groups in society. They face increased challenges when transitioning from care to independence, with Mendes et al (2006) finding that young care leavers have a higher risk of "poor life outcomes" in comparison to young people who have not been in out-of-home care. The young care leavers who are most at risk of poor outcomes include those who have had multiple placements while in care, and those who leave care at a younger age (Uniting Care, 2014).

For young people who are not in out-of-home care, the transition to independence is often gradual, with many young people preferring to stay living at home with their parents well into their twenties. This number has risen, in comparison to one in five in 1986 (Australia Bureau of Statistics, 2009). Furthermore, many of these young people receive ongoing support and guidance from their families, and have the option to return home if needed (Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs et al, 2010). In contrast, young care leavers are a highly vulnerable group, and many young care leavers have less support when transitioning from care to independent living in comparison to those who have not been in out-of-home care (Government of Western Australia, 2011). As a result, young care leavers face additional hardships when attempting to access education, employment, and housing (Jonson, et al, 2014).

When transitioning to independent living, young care leavers often feel fearful, worrying about how they will provide for themselves and maintain stable accommodation once they have left care (Snow; Mann-Feder, 2013). Struggling to support themselves and becoming homeless is a very real possibility for young

care leavers, with young care leavers currently facing a homelessness crisis. 35% of young care leavers who leave out-of-home care at 18 years of age experience homelessness (The Home Stretch, 2016). The Home Stretch report (2012) suggests "Victoria currently provides approximately 11 million dollars a year to support care leavers including discrete Indigenous support and housing assistance programs".

Research has identified that many young people with a background in out-of-home care have experienced significant trauma and abuse prior to or during their time in out-of-home care, as well as having experienced substantial school disruption, unstable housing, and multiple caregivers. Due to the hardships faced during their time in out-of-home care, young care leavers are often developmentally challenged in a range of areas, including education, life skills and emotional intelligence, in contrast to young people who have not lived in out-of-home care (Snow et al, 2013). Young care leavers have a higher risk of homelessness, unemployment, young parenthood, imprisonment, prostitution, suicide or self-harm, low education levels, poor social connections, and a dependence on social welfare, in comparison to young people who have not live in out-of-home care (Government of Western Australia, 2011). Despite these challenges, young care leavers are expected to live and survive independently at 18 in a way that is "incompatible with their maturity or abilities" (McCluskey, 2010). Research by the Youth Affairs Council of Victoria (2016) found that "there are priority groups of young people who face higher-than-average risks of poor mental health, due to disadvantage, discrimination and distress. These groups include: young people who are homeless and young people in the child protection service system". This disadvantage and distress often leaves young care leavers in a particularly vulnerable spot for developing mental health issues, and alcohol and other drug problems. For instance, the Berry Street Leaving Care Report (2016) stated that over 50% of young care leavers experience significant mental health issues (such as anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorders, and depression), and substance abuse problems.

Moving on, surviving and struggling

Stein (2005) suggests that young care leavers can fall into three broad categories: the 'moving on' group, the survivors, and the strugglers (also referred to as the victims). The category in which each young care leaver falls depends on the young care leaver's level of resilience, family history, social networks, and the overall experience a young care leaver has had during their placement in out-of-home care (Stein, 2008).

The 'moving on' group includes young people who have successfully transitioned from care to independence. Those in the moving on group have often had stability and security in their lives, as well as positive supportive families and social relationships. The moving on group have also often obtained some education prior to leaving care. Those young people who fall into this group did not

see leaving care as a burden, but instead an opportunity to better their lives. The young people in this group made good use of the support services provided to them, as well as pursuing their own education and employment opportunities, and/or finding a partner and starting a family (Stein, 2012).

The survivors group includes young people who have often had a more unstable and rocky experience while in care, often moving to various placements or experiencing placement breakdowns during their time in care. Young people in the survivors group often leave care earlier than others leave, and often experience issues with homelessness, low paying unstable work or unemployment. Although the survivors struggle with hardships once they transition to independence, young people in this group see themselves as tough and self-reliant. Although the survivors who view themselves as self-reliant do show great strength and resilience, this self-reliance can also cause the young people in this group to not access services should they experience hardship and need support (Stein, 2012).

The strugglers group includes young people who have faced the most hardship and disadvantage in comparison to the other two groups. The young people in the strugglers group have often encountered a difficult or "damaging" upbringing prior to/during out-of-home care. The difficulties faced by the young people in this group often mean they poorly adapt to being in out-of-home care, and poorly adapt to independence once they have left out-of-home care. The young people in the strugglers group often have mental health problems, obtain low levels of education, have high levels of unemployment, and have little to no supportive social networks around them, leading to isolation and loneliness (Stein, 2005).

Young care leavers can often go between these three stages during their transition from care, and after care. The groups are best understood on a spectrum instead of individual categories. Leaving care service providers need to provide services that deliver ongoing support should a once well-adjusted and seemingly successful transitioned young care leaver begins to struggle with independent living and need additional support. Stein (2012) identified that the young people in the groups that made the most successful transition to independence had accessed multiple support services prior to their exit from care, and had a supportive social network around them prior to and after becoming independent. Leaving care service providers should aim to build a young care leaver's resilience prior to their exit from care, as well as encompass life skills programs provided to young care leavers, and encourage and assist young care leavers to build supportive social networks.

Social disadvantages

Becoming independent is a major life event for most young people, and yet young care leavers often face this independence isolated and afraid of being alone, without a safety net of family, friends or community supports to turn to (Snow; Mann-Feder, 2013). Mendes (2012) found that "young care leavers are often socially excluded from participation in mainstream social, economic, political, and cultural systems. They lack access to informal social networks such as extended family, family friends, school-based supports, youth friendship groups, and local sporting, cultural and religious groups." To combat this isolation, young care leavers will often search for social supports, and if these social supports are not available, the isolation can then lead to significant and ongoing social, emotional, psychological, and developmental delays, as well as causing significant behavioral issues (Mendes & Moslehuddin, 2007; Mudaly & Goddard, 2006).

To form the skills to build positive and healthy relationships as adults, young care leavers need to experience healthy, safe and stable relationships while they are in out-of-home care. Children and young people in out-of-home care have often experienced broken relationships, disrupted placements or placement breakdowns, and abuse or trauma prior to or during their time in out-of-home care. Young people in out-of-home care often face increased difficulties in defining who they are and where they belong. Young people in out-of-home care have often lived in multiple placements, have moved to different areas frequently, and often live at placements with carers that have different ethnic or cultural backgrounds to their own. The disrupted ability to belong and form close relationships can increase a young care leaver's risk of experiencing unstable and unhealthy relationships later in their lives (Become, 2017).

Peer Support

Peer support may be key to improving the issue of isolation and loneliness for young care leavers. Peer support may provide young care leavers with companionship, and may assist the young care leavers to build a supportive social network. A positive social network such as peer support is a protective factor for young people; protective factors reduce the probability of a young person developing a mental health problem, and emotional or behavioral disorder later in their lives (Youth.gov, 2017).

Peer groups

A peer group is defined as a group of people who share similar ages, statuses, backgrounds and interests. For young people who do not have family supports to turn to, peer relationships become increasingly important sources for guidance, security and emotional support (Snow; Mann-Feder, 2013). The literature on young people and adolescents has often recognised the importance of peers in development. Supportive peer groups are important, as they assist a young person to define

their interests, abilities, reputation, and identity (Palmonari et al, 1990). Developing a positive sense of identity has been linked to higher levels of resilience. A young person who has a positive sense of identity often has a healthy self-esteem, self-efficacy and self-knowledge (Stein, 2005). Peer groups are crucial to a young care leaver as they play a vital role in a young person's transition to independence. Young people will often look to their peer groups and relationships for "learning, emotional support and a sense of security" (Snow et al. 2013). Research also shows that young people largely prefer to gather support from their peers rather than from adults (Gerald, 2009).

Peer support model approach

A peer support model is often described as individuals with shared experiences coming together to support and aid one another, by listening empathetically, sharing their experiences and offering suggestions based on that experience. This builds a sense of community and by assisting others, the individuals themselves feel empowered and more in control over their own life (Mind Australia, 2015).

While peer models have long been used to support recovery (such as peer-led alcohol recovery, Alcoholics Anonymous, or peer-led AOD recovery and SHARC). Australian organisations have only recently become aware of the importance of peer models and how they can influence behaviours, wellbeing and life outcomes, with youth services often using peer groups to deliver their programs. Although providing a platform for peer support maybe not intentionally be the aim of their programs, youth services often enable young people to engage with their peers, and build relationships in a supported group environment, therefore engaging young people in a form of peer support.

Peer support models can assist people by:

- + encouraging people to get involved in programs and in their care;
- + decreasing isolation helps to build a sense of belonging;
- + building community and fostering supportive and healthy relationships;
- + drawing on a person's experiences, enabling them to use their lived experience to help others, and in turn, gain empowerment over their own lives;
- + building trust – people tend to be more receptive to those who have shared their experiences.

Peer support models can assist young people by:

- + decreasing insolation and loneliness, enabling young people to build supportive friendships;
- + being non-clinical, decreasing the power imbalance between worker and young person;

- + enabling young people to speak about their experiences in a safe and supported environment with others who have shared their feelings and experiences;
- + drawing on a young person's strengths;
- + enabling young people to assist and support one another through hard times;
- + enabling young people to use their knowledge and experiences of services to recommend and help other young people to access services;
- + assisting young people in obtaining further education and employment;
- + assisting young people to learn new skills;
- + supporting a young person's overall wellbeing.

Organisations currently using the peer support approach for young care

Currently there are a small number of organisations, both in Australia and overseas, adopting the peer support approach into the programs and services they provide for young care leavers.

The following organisations have incorporated diverse peer support approaches in the services they provide.

- + The Voyager Project is a program that uses the peer support approach for young people in out-of-home care to reduce the stigma and create belonging for those in out of home care.
- + FosterClub is an organisation providing a nation-wide online social network for young people in out-of-home care.
- + The Rees Foundation provides supportive networking opportunities for young people and adults who have transitioned from of out-of-home care to independence.
- + Whitelion and The Reach Foundation jointly provide RAMP, a mentoring program that also incorporates peer support by way of camp and other social activities.

These organisations, programs and services all have positive feedback, and show that the peer support approach can be incorporated and adapted into services in varying ways.

The Voyager Project

The Voyager Project in Toronto, Canada is one example of a potential program for increasing positive outcomes for young care leavers. The Voyager Project is a program based on a peer support model, and is described as a "social innovation program that sees peers who grew up in government care reach out to and mentor other young people in and from care" (Snow et al, 2013). This project emphasizes the importance of belonging for young people in care, viewing belonging as a basic and vital human need.

The Voyager Project paper was written in collaboration with the participants of the project (Voyagers), all of whom have previous care experience. Many Voyagers describe feeling as if they did not belong prior to entering the Voyager Project, and that being a foster child made them feel judged or treated differently in comparison to those who had not been in care. The Voyagers spoke highly of the project, one member expressing that they "finally have a chance to experience honest human connection", and that being in care is normal in this setting, with the program allowing them to be open about their feelings and experiences in the system without the fear of being judged. Another expressed that when they saw other youth in care work hard and improve themselves it made them determined to do the same. This paper addresses the importance of moving away from traditional care services and instead focusing more on promoting "interdependence and interconnection" through peers as key indicators for a successful transition to independence (Snow, et al. 2013).

FosterClub

FosterClub is an American not-for profit organisation that provides a nationwide peer support network for young people in out-of-home care, with a belief that the experiences young people have in out-of-home care give them expertise to help others. The online FosterClub site shows the perspectives of young people and adults who have been in out-of-home care and the issues that many young people in care face, which FosterClub says enhances the sense of belonging felt by young people who visit the site. Many of the stories on FosterClub speak of the issues that come with being in out-of-home care, as well as many stories also encouraging others and giving hope by means of advice or their own stories of how they overcame hardship (FosterClub, 2017).

The Rees Foundation

The Rees Foundation is an English philanthropic organisation that provides funding and networking opportunities for those with a care experience. The Rees Foundation provides successful peer-to-peer support services run through a charity organisation. Although their website states that "services are open to anyone who has been in care", once contacted about their services it was found that there was an age requirement for care leavers who access the service, with the organisation explaining that this service is mostly accessed by older care leavers (Rees Foundation, 2017).

RAMP

Mentoring services are often utilized by organizations to address the isolation and loneliness issue among young care leavers and provide a connection to a positive role model. Although these programs have shown success, the mentoring is often done one-on-one, therefore the young care leavers are only able to build a connection with one person. The RAMP Mentoring program, run through WhiteLion and in partnership with The Reach Foundation, is a "personal development and mentoring program designed to meet the needs of high-risk young people aged 13 to 17 years of age in residential care in Melbourne" (The Reach Foundation, 2017). The RAMP

program mixes traditional mentoring with the opportunity for young people in out-of-home care to interact with their peers, through a "positive experiential workshop and camp format". This allows young people in out-of-home care to meet and connect with a mentor, while also connecting with other young people in out-of-home care going through the same process. The evaluation from this program has been positive, with an additional first-hand comment being made during the focus group for this project by a young person mentioning that they "still have friends they made in this program".

Young people's input

An important component for this research report was to obtain and include contributions from young people. Engaging with people who had a lived experience of out-of-home care was crucial to identifying if there was a need for peer support among young care leavers. As well as identifying a need, it was important to find out what young people would want from a peer support program should it be implemented, and how they would want it to be facilitated.

The focus group was held in September 2017. The participants were recruited through a local youth service. Information provided by the participants was acquired through a focus group which included both verbal discussion and a written survey. Ten young people participated in the focus group. The young people were aged between 19-23 years of age. The participants identified as male, female and gender diverse. The young people came from varying backgrounds, some had experienced living in out-of-home care and leaving care, and others had experienced leaving home and homelessness at an early age. The young people participating in this focus group supported this project with passion and enthusiasm in hopes to make a positive difference for young people leaving care.

Method

The focus group was run in a familiar setting for the participants. The youth worker present had worked with the young people for some time, and had a good relationship with all young people participating. The worker remained throughout the survey to assist and to ensure that all young people involved felt comfortable and supported. Prior to asking the questions, a detailed explanation of the research project was given, as well as information on how the information gathered would be used. The young people were then presented with a consent form to sign. Once the young people had heard the explanation of the project and had signed the consent form, they were then provided with survey forms. An explanation was given to the young people that each question would be read aloud and discussed as a group, and the young people were also provided with the option of writing their answers down on the paper should they not wish to share out loud. A scribe was also taking notes as participants spoke.

Scenario questions

The survey used a hypothetical case of a young person named "Sam". The hypothetical case of a young care leaver was used to preserve the privacy of the young people present and not force them to make personal disclosures. As not all young people had a background in care, the young people participating in the survey were instead encouraged to put themselves in Sam's shoes, and answer the questions accordingly. Some questions did not use the hypothetical case of Sam.

The Results

The key themes that emerged from the responses of the young people participating in the focus group were:

- + Leaving care and moving into independence can cause feelings of fear, isolation, and loneliness for young care leavers.
- + Young care leavers may struggle to manage these feelings, sometimes developing unhealthy coping mechanisms such as alcohol and other drug abuse, self-harm, acting out, and going against authority.
- + If a young care leaver was to speak with another young person with out-of-home care experience they would first need to build a positive and trusting relationship.
- + If a young care leaver was to share their story of transitioning to independence with a young person who had just began the leaving care process, the young people believe this would help the young person beginning their transition, and would make the young care leaver themselves feel empowered.
- + Speaking with a young person who had transitioned from out-of-home care into independence may assist young care leavers to access more support services, and feel more hopeful about their own transition to independence.
- + Meeting with a supportive group of young care leavers may reduce loneliness and isolation, and promote feelings of happiness for a young care leaver.
- + Having more social supports would encourage young people to pursue further education and more job opportunities.
- + The young people in the group believe there are benefits for young care leavers from participating in a peer support group. These benefits include the potential for long-term relationships to be formed, and the support that would come from being involved in a group.

Answers

*All quotes are from young people

Do you think that Sam felt isolated (having minimal contact or little in common with others) or lonely during the transitioning from care or once Sam had left care?

The young people in the group believed that Sam would feel isolated, scared, unwanted, unsupported, vulnerable and alone during their transition into independence, and once they had left out-of-home care and moved to independence.

"Sam would be scared and not know who to trust. There is nobody to turn too because everyone thinks you should be able to handle it, as you are now an "adult"."

"If I was in Sam's position, I would feel scared and uncomfortable, I would feel isolated and not welcomed by anyone. I could also feel anxious and worried, which is followed by depression and suicidal thoughts"

"I would feel uncomfortable and alone, as I was living alone for the first time, and vulnerable as I wouldn't have any support"

"Sam would feel isolated, lonely, unsupported, and not wanted."

The young people responded that if Sam had more stability prior to leaving out-of-home care, they might feel more settled once they transitioned to independence.

"It (the transition to independence) could be different for different people, as some may feel more settled- e.g. they may have lived in the same resi (Residential Care) for years, or another might not have moved around a lot"

How do you think Sam might combat those feelings of loneliness or isolation?

The young people in the group responded that Sam would cope with the feelings of fear, isolation and loneliness by turning to unhealthy coping mechanisms, such as drug and alcohol abuse, smoking, self-harm, becoming withdrawn, and rebelling against authority.

"Sam might turn to drugs, crime, sex or books."

"Sam might feel like doing drugs or even going against the authorities"

"Sam might turn to drugs or alcohol, or he might rely on his friends, he might turn to crime or self-harm"

"Sam would make a real effort to hold onto previously made connections, possibly turn to drugs or alcohol maybe, crime, lash out at people trying to help, or lose all self-respect, and turn to meaningless sex in order to feel something."

During this question, the young people also responded that Sam's ability to cope may depend on what coping skills they had developed during their time in out-of-home care, as well as their level of education prior to leaving care.

"It depends on what coping skills Sam has developed throughout the years, also the level of education can have an effect on Sam's behaviours"

One young person in the group also spoke about where Sam might turn to should they need support. This included a case manager that could assist Sam in learning life skills.

"Sam might get a case manager to help manage housing, budgeting and paying bills"

Do you think Sam would feel comfortable with speaking with other young care leavers about their transition from care?

The young people in the group responded that Sam would first need to get to know other young care leavers and build a trusting relationship with them. Only then would feel Sam feel comfortable enough to speak openly about out-of-home care, and the leaving care process.

"Not straight away, but possibly over time. It would be easier to talk to someone who can relate. Alternatively, talking to someone who has also has a hard life can spark a subconscious competition "That's not as bad as what I went through"."

"Possibly, more so as you have a shared experience. I left home at 14, not due to out-of-home care, but I enjoy talking to other early home leavers."

"It might take time to build trust."

One young person responded that Sam may feel more comfortable because the other young care leavers share their experience.

"Yes. Sam would tell them his experience. I would feel comfortable speaking with someone who has been in the same situation as me."

Do you think Sam would want to share their past experiences of the leaving care process to assist another young person currently leaving care?

Many of the young people in the group responded yes, as they would want to help the other young care leaver, prevent them from going down a negative path, and prevent them from making bad decisions.

"Yes, I would share my experiences with other young people so that they can learn from my mistakes, and they don't have to go through it the same way"

"Yes, I would, because helping other people gives me happiness and joy"

"Yes, I would, to help them not go the same way I went, I would also share my experience with them so they know what to expect and what is coming"

"If it was a safe space, and the relationship had been built, then yes. To help them avoid your mistakes and give advice / guidance / help people know what to expect."

The young people also responded that it would first depend on Sam's and the other young care leavers' mind-frame, considering how their mental health was at that current time and how they were coping with their transition to independence.

"It mostly depends on personally where I was at. If I was in a bad place there is no way I would share, but I was doing okay, then I'd be more likely to share"

"It depends if Sam's experience was a positive or a negative one"

How do you think Sam would feel about sharing their experience of leaving care to help others?

The young people in the group responded that Sam would feel empowered, happy and would feel like they had a purpose. The young people also responded that Sam would be able to turn their negative situation into a positive through supporting another person and make a positive impact in that person's life.

"It would make it all feel worthwhile, like all the challenges and hard times would be easier to deal with if Sam knew it was helping others."

"It would give Sam a sense of achievement, making a positive from a negative"

"Positive because Sam would know other people would gain knowledge and learn a lot from his skills"

"It would be great because then it is in a way ensuring that other aren't alone and don't experience the same negative things."

How do you think Sam would feel if they spoke with someone who had transitioned out of care into independence?

The young people in the group responded that if the person Sam spoke with had a positive leaving care experience themselves, and if Sam was ready and wanted to hear about this person's experience then this could have a positive impact on Sam. The young people responded that Sam would feel less lonely, more in control of their life, and more hopeful about their future.

"I think Sam would feel less lonely and more in control of his life"

"If they gave Sam positive advice and made him believe that he can do it. The Stage they are at might be important. If you are in a bad way you might feel resentment towards someone who had it good."

"Yes, I do think it will help Sam feel more hopeful for the future."

"Yes, I think that Sam would want to speak with someone so that he can gain learning and understanding."

"I think Sam would feel like "This person has done it so I can do it"."

Do you think Sam would be interested in how a person had transitioned from leaving care, into independence successfully? and would Sam be interested in learning about what services this person had used to assist their transition to independence?

The young people in the group responded that Sam would be interested, as this person could help Sam to learn about and access new services. The young people responded that speaking with a person who had transitioned successfully into independence may give Sam hope that they too could do well once they had transitioned to independence.

"Yes, because it would give Sam hope"

"Yes, because what he went through is on his mind, so he will want to see if there were other ways he could live his life"

"Yes, it would be good to hear about other's experiences"

The young people in the group also responded that Sam's interest in speaking with a person who had transitioned from care would depend on Sam's mind-frame at the time.

"Depends on the mind frame. As an early home leaver, it took some 'tough love' for me to start getting support"

"If Sam was in an okay place then yes, it is very possible Sam would have listened. It also depends on the way the other person words what they have to say, and how they say it, so it doesn't come across as telling Sam what he did wrong"

Do you think that Sam would want to meet with a group of other young people who were also currently leaving care, do you think that would make leaving care easier for Sam?

The young people in the group believed that meeting with a group of young care leavers would be beneficial for Sam, if Sam felt comfortable in a group setting. The young people also responded that the young care leavers in the group would need to share the same goals, have a positive attitude, and develop good relationships with one another. The young people also thought that the group of young care leavers would need to be run by a facilitator who had good skills working with young people, and also be someone who was relatable.

"It might if they were hopeful at being successful at leaving care, it depends of the people"

"Yes and no depending on his (Sam's) capacity in a social group. He may feel uncomfortable in a group, but he could benefit a lot from it."

"It would be more beneficial than not if a group all left together, but they may also have a negative influence on each other. Overall, I think it would help though."

"It needs a facilitator that has experience either personally in out-of-home care, or working with young people in out-of-home care. This facilitator would have good skills, and be relatable"

The young people in the group also spoke about how living in different areas and coming from different sections of care may impact on the group dynamic and outcomes.

"It depends on the section of care that you come from, and where others (in the group) came from. Resi (Residential care) and foster care kids don't always mix."

"The group depends on which section of care (e.g. Resi or Foster Care), it also would help if the young people were from the same areas"

How do you think that meeting with a group of young people who are also transitioning from care or have left care have made Sam feel? (less isolated or alone, happy, anxious)

The young people in the group responded that Sam would feel anxious at first, but as they got to know the group of young care leavers they would grow to feel more comfortable. The young people in the group also responded that meeting with a group of young care leavers would make Sam feel happy and supported, and less isolated and alone.

"Sam would definitely feel less isolated."

"Anxious at first, but he would gradually feel more capable and happy. The group could become the network he needs and make the transition out of care smooth."

"Less isolated, maybe anxious, he might talk to them (the other young people in the group) about their care experience, to see how they feel about the care system."

"At first, he would be anxious, but then less alone, less isolated, happy to be getting that social connection"

If you were Sam, would having more social supports encourage you to further your education/pursue more job opportunities?

The young people in the group all responded positively with yes as they thought that the social supports would provide them with encouragement and support to pursue more education and job opportunities.

"Yes, you would know that you are not alone, and that you have somewhere to go for help."

"Yes, having more social supports would help with school and jobs training."

"Positive social networks will help you get far in life"

"Yes, as I would have someone to motivate me, and have someone I can complain to after a bad day."

"Definitely having people encouraging you and supporting you to better your life is always easier than not having anyone supporting you. Everyone needs a hype man (or woman)"

You are currently involved in a type of peer support group; do you feel encouraged and supported in this group?

The young people in the group responded that they did feel supported and encouraged in their current peer group. The young people commented that their current group was supportive, that they felt respected, and that all those in the group shared the same goals.

"Yes, I do feel supported and encouraged, we respect one another, are able to get involved in decision making, we feel safe, accepted, we all want to be here, and everyone knows their purpose."

"Yes, I feel supported and encouraged because I know everyone is going through the same thing, you feel more supported in a group environment"

"Yes, I feel supported and encouraged, like people are listening to me and care, like im part of something bugger, an achievement"

"Yes, I do feel supported and encouraged, although there are some improvements that could be made"

What benefits do you see for young care leavers being involved in a peer support program?

The young people in the group all responded positively with yes, as they believed it would reduce isolation, assist the young care leavers to build life skills, and provide the young care leavers with additional support and long-lasting relationships.

"There is definitely support that comes from being in a peer support group, the relationships you make can be long lasting."

"peer support programs would give young care leavers feelings of support, and skills to better the transition for care, such as life skills.

Considerations when adopting a peer support approach

When putting together a peer support program for young care leavers, it is important to have clear criteria when selecting the young care leavers who will participate in the group. Young participants should feel emotionally ready to participate in a peer support program, should be interested in hearing and participating (should they choose) in conversations about out-of-home care experiences, and be eager to learn life skills and participate in relationship/team-building activities. The young care leavers participating in a peer support group should also be interested in meeting new people, and be open to building supportive relationships and building friendships with the other young people participating in the group. The young care leavers participating in a peer support group should share a positive attitude, be team orientated, and share similar hopes, values, and goals for the program as the other young care leavers participating in the group.

Leaving care service providers should provide a facilitator who has the necessary skills and knowledge to work with young people, as well as knowledge and experience working with young people with a background in out-of-home care. The facilitator should have knowledge and skills in conflict resolution, as well as the ability to apply trauma-informed, strength-based and recovery approaches to their work with young care leavers. Leaving care service providers should also emphasize the need for additional support services for the young care leavers, to ensure that the peer support program is not the sole source of support for the young care leavers participating in the program. Leaving care service providers that decide to use a peer support approach should also ensure that undue responsibility is not placed on young care leavers to provide the support for other young care leavers participating in the program. The main source of care and support should come from leaving care service providers and the government, as it is ultimately their responsibility.

Conclusion

Although research shows that supportive peer relationships for young care leavers play an important role in their development, there is a shortage of services available in Australia that address the need for young care leavers to build social skills, positive relationships and social networks (Stein, 2005). Currently, Australia is behind when it comes to providing appropriate services and effectively responding to the needs of young care leavers. There is a current scarcity of leaving care services that provide opportunities for young care leavers to meet with other young people leaving out-of-home care and foster supportive relationships between them in a supported environment. The need to support social connection is often overlooked by leaving care service providers, instead more emphasis is placed on connecting the young person with more practical supports, such as obtaining and maintain housing, financial assistance, and finding employment or education. There is a clear need for future research into the role that peers and supportive social networks have for young people leaving care. In Australia, leaving care service providers should be encouraged to provide more peer support services for young care leavers. By fostering supportive peer groups for young care leavers, leaving care service providers can assist young care leavers to learn interpersonal skills and gain confidence to pursue further social networks.

A peer support program for young care leavers should provide a safe space for young care leavers to build healthy and supportive relationships. Young care leavers participating in a peer support program should be given support from the services facilitating the program, as well as through additional resources and information. They should also be given the opportunity to engage in life skills activities, all of which will aid the young care leavers on their road to independence.

While there is an extensive amount of literature documenting poor outcomes for young people in out-of-home care, and for young care leavers who have transitioned to independence, thus far there is a shortage of studies and projects detailing positive outcomes for young care leavers, as well as possible strategies for addressing these poor outcomes. This research report has identified one avenue of building social networks for young care leavers. Through the use a peer support approach, those working with young people can also build social networks by connecting young care leavers in with supportive family members, community groups, employment or education opportunities, sporting clubs, social groups, or reconnecting with supportive past friend groups. Ultimately, governments and leaving care service providers need to put the human connection back in the picture for young care leavers.

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