

Fitness

Young people were offered opportunities to develop hobbies, fitness activities and access to places where they could meet other young people. Practitioners accompanied them to fitness centres for the first few times until the young person felt more settled. Memberships were provided which could be used when the young person moved on.

Singing

A priority area was to introduce young people to age-appropriate activities and peers. One example was of a young girl admitted due to severe self-harm. While in the unit, staff organised singing lessons for her. On her departure, she joined a local music school's gospel choir where she made new friends.

Sports coaching

A sports coaching course for a talented young football player helped him develop his skills and meet other people. This young person left with a range of football coaching certificates, which increased his self-esteem and helped him to make connections in his new community.

Building family relationships

A young person and his stepdad were provided with a football season ticket to create an opportunity for relationship-building. The young person had identified this fraught relationship as a reason why he had run away from home and got into trouble. The young person wanted to make the relationship work. Football was the interest they had in common.

Managing stress

A young woman with problematic substance use was supported to find alternative stress management techniques. She was introduced to the gym, sauna, and aromatherapy massage, saw a pantomime and took part in a Women's March in Glasgow. She indicated that the practitioner had introduced her to new possibilities of which she had no awareness. After undertaking a course as a nail technician, she progressed to a hairdressing course and living independently. She had no doubt that without this support she would have returned to secure care.

Practical skills for living

One unit set up a skills training group where young people learned how to build furniture from a DIY flat-pack, check for electrical wires in the wall when hanging pictures, what to do when your tap is leaking, minor clothing repairs and other basic skills. The topics were identified by both staff and young people.

Beyond the black bin bag

On leaving, the units provided young people with the following:

1. An information folder with their birth certificate, contact details, SQA candidate number and *Young Scot* card;
2. A proper suitcase;
3. A wash bag with basic toiletries for a month;
4. A mobile phone package with pre-programmed numbers topped up by £10 per week for the first 12 weeks as long as it was used appropriately;
5. A bank account;
6. A travel card;
7. A laptop with educational packages for those who were undertaking training.

The regulations on throughcare and aftercare provide some of these items on a discretionary basis. While these items should be advocated for, residential services should recognise that they may not be forthcoming, and look to see what can be provided within their budgets.

Concluding remarks

The building of relationships, trust and attachments in care can be a difficult task (Boendermaker, 1998; Buchanan, 1999). Such relationships, however, are extremely important. Different pathways of care leavers (moving-on, survivor and victim) are associated not only with the quality of care they experience, but also on their transition from care and the support they receive after care (Stein, 2006). This evaluation recognised the value of relationships that young people built with practitioners while in the unit. This was especially the case for those young people who had poor family engagement. Good practice in transitions is crucial to positive outcomes for young people. A real commitment to corporate parenting as laid down in the document *These are our Bairns* (Scottish Government, 2008b) should be followed up by ensuring that services have the resources to make good transitions a reality, and that practitioners learn as much as they can about the legal rights of those who are leaving care.

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Scottish Institute for Residential Child Care

IN RESIDENCE

Summarising recent research on important issues pertinent to residential child care and drawing out possible practice applications.

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Supporting transitions and throughcare: Some lessons from secure care

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Introduction

Research in the area of throughcare and transitions has highlighted major problems (Dixon and Stein, 2002 and 2005; Stein, 2006). In response to such findings, regulations and guidance were published, outlining responsibilities for supporting young people leaving care (Scottish Executive, 2004). In spite of this, the development of good practice in transitions has been slow. The SIRCC stakeholder review of 2007 identified throughcare and aftercare services as key areas for development and in 2009, during consultations held in relation to the National Residential Child Care Initiative (NRCCI), this was emphasised yet again. This paper outlines the findings of a recent evaluation of practice in the secure sector and explores some general principles which can be applied across the residential child care sector.

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The Throughcare Regulations and Guidance: What are young people entitled to?

The Regulations and Guidance includes duties to assess and review a young person’s aftercare needs and to establish clear plans called pathways. In addition to this, reports and guidelines on best practice have been developed which offer support to practitioners (Scottish Throughcare and Aftercare Forum, 2006; Scottish Commissioner for Children and Young People [SCCYP], 2008). It is strongly recommended that residential practitioners make themselves familiar with the Regulations and Guidance. Here are some of the legal entitlements of young people in care:

- The young person should be prepared for leaving care (Reg. 6)
- The views of young people must be taken into account when leaving care and throughout the pathway planning and review process (Reg. 3)
- The local authority must provide suitable accommodation that meets the needs of the young person (Reg. 14)
- Young people should not be placed in unsuitable bed and breakfast or hostel accommodation (Guidance 9.3)

The local authority also has a responsibility to provide financial assistance. This assistance is important as young people may not be eligible for other state benefits until they are 18 years old. Under the Children (Scotland) Act 1995, the local authority can provide support up to the age of 21 years in some cases, and even beyond this if the young person is in education or training.

The Secure Transitions Evaluation: Some lessons for wider practice

The Secure Transitions Fund was set up by the Scottish Executive in April 2007 to help achieve better transitions for young people leaving secure care. Research showed that many young people leaving secure care were often re-admitted (Walker et al., 2005). The fund was set up to provide additional support for young people leaving secure care, in an effort to reduce the number of re-admissions. The fund was only available for one year, but the innovative practice which developed served to inspire all who were involved. SIRCC was asked to evaluate the impact of the fund. This evaluation took place between August and November 2007. The key findings were:

1. Continuity of care is crucially important for positive outcomes;
2. Employment, college or job training are key factors in a good transition;

3. Proactive practice from staff improved, as they moved from asking ‘Why are you here?’ to ‘Where are you going?’
4. Inadequate range of supported living units;
5. Poor pathway planning by throughcare and aftercare (TCAC) social workers;
6. A need for additional training of residential staff in TCAC regulations and guidelines;
7. A lack of family work.

These findings echoed research and literature on throughcare and aftercare and demonstrated that practice could be improved. The findings will now be described and their applicability to the residential child care sector in general will be explored.

Continuity of care

Practitioners felt that continuity of care demonstrated proper corporate parenting where young people were placed at the heart of their provision:

If your own teenager lives on his own and needs you, he will come home and you would look after him for a while wouldn't you? But if these kids are having difficulties, who looks after them? Who offers them a bed for the night? We need more opportunity for them to fall back on the relationships they know with the people they have connected with (Manager).

Most practitioners valued the opportunity to continue their relationship with young people beyond their departure date. In addition, staff engagement after departure made a deep impression on the young people. If a connection was made with a practitioner during the placement, it was recognised how important this relationship could be as a template both for future relationships as well as for continued engagement with social services in times of need.

Practice considerations

Services should look at ways to validate the connections that young people make while in care and offer continuity of those relationships during the transition time. Residential units could examine ways to structure group care duties alongside a reasonable level of transitions support. Visits back to the unit should be encouraged, in line with the National Care Standards.

Education, employment and vocational training

A variety of support mechanisms were implemented to encourage education, employment or vocational training. The evaluation found that most of the young people interviewed chose a vocational route. The support meant that young people were more likely to sustain their transition

to mainstream education, college or work. In one example, a young person struggled to hold down employment on two occasions. The unit had a range of supported employment places within its services and the young person undertook one of these. This placement proved to be important in the young person’s journey toward developing skills for work. After this period of initial support, a manager within the supported employment placement commented:

It means something if a young person comes through wind and rain and darkness and shows up for work on time every day despite all the travelling

Without exception, vocational training or being in employment provided a helpful focus as well as future aspirations for young people during their transition. The role of support during this time can be critical for the young person.

Practice considerations

Services should look at ways in which practitioners can provide practical active support for young people accessing job and college placements. In the initial stages of college or work, young people who have been in care may lack confidence or have poor self-esteem. Practical support from practitioners at the early stages of new education or employment experiences (e.g. accompanying young people to the setting, classroom support or arranging to meet them during break times) can create better outcomes. Practitioners should be aspirational for their young people in terms of their education and those who wish to pursue academic routes should be given as much support as possible.

Proactive practice

A majority of practitioners in the evaluation indicated that, by focusing on continuity of care, they changed their thinking from ‘where did you come from and why were you placed here?’ to ‘where are you going?’ This shift resulted in care plans with a stronger aftercare focus. As one practitioner said:

We want to help young people to be better prepared for what it's like to really be alone, and not to have the back-up of, for example, the close support unit... like when you run out of milk, you just walk over to (the unit) and ask. Or when your electricity meter runs out, to make sure you have money to put in the meter

While it is important for practitioners to have an appreciation of the young person’s history, young people should also be given an opportunity to explore their hopes and fears for the future. Encouraging the young person to look at where they want to be in ten years time and focusing on their future life path reflects the approach of Social Pedagogy. In the Netherlands, time in care was used

for learning, evolving and moving on. Practice involved mentoring, coaching and empowering young people and their families to do things on their own again. It encouraged young people to be aspirational in all realms of life, to explore their talents, and not simply to define themselves as a troubled young person. This approach mirrors *Getting it Right for Every Child* (GIRFEC) (Scottish Government, 2009). The importance of building a healthy relationship with young people is emphasised strongly in Social Pedagogy while learning, empowerment and aspirations are key themes for practice. Services should seek to engage with the Social Pedagogy agenda in Scotland.

Practice considerations

Meetings could be set up to discuss transition plans and support services for young people. This focus on a young person’s future development and how to support them to benefit from this, is highly motivating both for practitioners and young people. The evaluation also highlighted the role of the transitions coordinator, who ensured that transitions remained a priority. Units or organisations could look at developing such a service.

Appropriate accommodation for care leavers

The *Sweet 16* report (SCCYP, 2008) described the inadequacy of accommodation for care leavers. This evaluation confirmed these findings. Practitioners reported that young people were often discharged to inappropriate accommodation such as hostels or bed and breakfast facilities, often when they had just turned 16 years old. There were no specialist services for young people with problematic substance use, in spite of this being a growing problem. The majority of practitioners and managers expressed concern about the expectation that care leavers should function independently at an earlier age, and with much less support than the average young person in Scotland. According to the *Sweet 16* report, the average age that young people leave home is 22 years old. Yet the residential sector in Scotland generally expects young people to be leaving the unit much earlier than this. As one practitioner put it:

Why are we sending such vulnerable children out there on their own?

Without exception, every practitioner who took part in the evaluation felt a real sense of anger, sadness and frustration over this.

Practice considerations

There is a need for a range of appropriate accommodation for young people when leaving care. Although individual practitioners and services cannot provide this, it is useful to find out exactly what might be available in the area. This is especially the case for special need housing associations as well as organisations offering supported accommodation.

It also demonstrates a need for practitioners and services to advocate actively on behalf of young people if they are in danger of being discharged into inappropriate settings. There is also a role for organisations to look at retaining its young people until they are old enough to cope with life outside the group care setting. Finally, organisations could look at providing off-site supported accommodation.

Poor pathway planning and a need for training

The evaluation showed that practitioners had to remind social workers or TCAC staff to develop pathway plans. In all but two units, the majority of young people left secure care without a pathway plan in place. Sadly this reflects the residential care sector in general, where the latest statistics indicate that only 55% of young people leave care with a pathway plan in place (Scottish Government, 2008a). In many cases, release from the unit was unanticipated. Practitioners felt that young people leaving secure care were not a priority for social workers. They stated that some social workers did not expect young people to succeed. Some social workers minimised their involvement as they felt they were wasting their time, according to staff.

Individual social workers cannot be blamed for the size of their caseloads. Also, many young people in secure care are placed outwith their own authority, so there can be complications in the support and coordination of pathway plans. Nevertheless, the fact that pathway plans were the exception and not the rule was worrying. It demonstrates a failure in the corporate parenting of young care leavers. The evaluation also showed that issues which should have been addressed in pathway planning, such as mental and physical health problems were often not followed up when a young person left the unit.

Practice considerations

Practitioners must advocate strongly for pathway planning to take place. Some practitioners are unclear about the regulations and guidance which govern throughcare and aftercare. Services should address this, and provide training on the legislation and guidance, and on advocacy skills. The importance of well-developed advocacy skills cannot be stressed enough. Practitioners are often in the best position to advocate for the children in their care and ensure they receive the services and benefits to which they are entitled.

The need for family work

Home placements after a period of care seemed to fail frequently. This emphasises the importance of family work while the young person is in the unit. The Children (Scotland) Act 1995 and guidelines such as GIRFEC encourage partnership with parents. In practice, however, this can be difficult. This evaluation found that family work was not done. Informal family work consisted of

seeing parents at visiting times and briefly updating them on their child’s activities within the unit. Contextual methods of family work emphasise inclusive approaches which lead automatically to seeing children as a natural extension and reflection of their family system (Nagy and Krasner, 1986). As such, if you want to understand what is going on for a young person, you have to include the whole family system.

Most young people report that their family remains central to them. Practitioners should make sure that opportunities are created for family issues to be resolved. Many practitioners in this evaluation felt that this was the job of the social worker and also that units were not the most welcoming environments for families to visit. Due to this and the absence of any formal joint work between the parent(s) and young person (including siblings), issues within the family are not dealt with, and opportunities for closure and moving on were not created. This could result in a recurrence of earlier problems within the family that were witnessed before the placement. Parents felt powerless to deal with their child which could result in another placement.

In response to this, Stepdown, an organisation offering transition support to young people in secure care, offered a parenting course that focused on practical skills for rebuilding relationships. It encouraged parents to have realistic expectations around house rules, as well as providing some ideas for dealing with challenging behaviour. Parents who undertook this course felt more confident and able to make choices about their responses to the child’s behaviour. They also reported a better understanding of their child’s internal world.

Practice considerations

Research demonstrates that the judgemental attitudes of practitioners toward family members can be a factor in the lack of parental contact with young people in care (Pilkington, 2005). In negotiation with social workers, family work could become a greater part of the placement plan for a young person, where circumstances permit. The skills of residential practitioners and their knowledge of the young person can be invaluable in these circumstances. An action plan could be developed when the young person is admitted, which actively addresses how the unit and practitioners will engage with the family, if this is appropriate. It may also be helpful for the unit to have a statement about how it will welcome parents into the lives of their children.

Some transferable initiatives

Different initiatives were undertaken in the secure units to support transitions. The initiatives outlined are transferable to the wider residential sector.