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Original Research Article

Experiences of parents in 'The Village,' an online support network for care-experienced parents: A thematic analysis

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The Why Not Trust for Care-Experienced Young People

Abstract:

Becoming a parent is a time of major shifts in identity and social relationships. A strong social network is crucial for positive parent and child outcomes, but for care-experienced parents, this network is likely to be reduced due to the care system itself putting them at a disadvantage when transitioning to parenthood. Research typically focuses on the negative outcomes for care-experienced parents, but little attention is given to those for whom parenting is a positive and transformational experience if provided with proper support. This article discusses barriers to care-experienced parents accessing support and the rationale behind 'The Village,' an online community for care-experienced parents in Scotland that offers emotional, parenting, practical, and social support. Twenty-two care-experienced parents supported by The Village shared their experiences of being part of The Village and the impact this has had on their wellbeing and parenting. A thematic analysis identified benefits across the following key themes: relationships, parenting, and entitlements. Suggestions for improvement and future directions are also discussed.

Introduction

It is estimated that every year, 500 babies are born to parents with care-experience in Scotland (McTier et al., 2023). Parents with experience of care are likely to face challenges beyond those that affect all new parents. Due to family breakdown, and likely frequent moves while growing up, care-experienced parents tend to lack adequate social and family support, as well as experiencing difficulty sustaining supportive relationships. This is in part caused by barriers put in place by the care system itself, that will continue to have an impact on the



social networks of care-experienced people long after they move on from care (Teer, 2021; Tzouvara et al., 2023).

Those who have experience of care typically exhibit poorer mental health and lower self-esteem than their peers (Cummings & Shelton, 2024; Parsons et al., 2024; Sanders, 2023). Evidence suggests that young people with experience of care are more likely to become parents early, have poor health outcomes, and attain a lower level of education, training, and employment, especially without proper support (Roberts et al., 2017). Care-experienced parents are also more prone to facing financial difficulties and housing instability, both of which can negatively impact their parenting experience (Parsons et al., 2024).

Barriers for care-experienced parents

The transition to parenthood is a major identity shift for any new parent, and this process may be even more stressful for those who are care-experienced. Isolation, low self-esteem, poor parenting role models, stigma, and negative biases held by services and professionals are all potential barriers for those with care-experience who are trying to succeed as parents (Care Journeys, 2022; Purtell et al., 2022; Roberts et al., 2019; Targosz et al., 2003).

Care-experienced parents are more likely to view professionals as judgemental rather than supportive and may avoid going to professionals with questions and concerns for fear it will make them look like a 'bad parent,' or worse, result in their children being removed (Care Journeys, 2022). Care-experienced parents have reported that they feel professionals are constantly looking for evidence of child maltreatment rather than working to help them improve their skills (Roberts et al., 2017).

While it is important to always prioritise the safety of the child, there is evidence of what Purtell et al. (2022) refer to as 'surveillance bias,' in which services are more likely to make negative assumptions about a person's ability to parent if they are care experienced. A study in Wales found that although less than 1% of children in Wales are in care at any time, over 25% of mothers and 20% of fathers whose children have been adopted were care-experienced themselves (Roberts et al., 2017). The researchers studied a sample of parents whose children had been removed and placed for adoption and found that for 58% of care-experienced parents it was their first child who had been removed, compared to only 18% of their non-care-experienced peers. However, there were no significant differences in crime involvement or substance misuse between parents who were and were not care-experienced. These findings suggest a hypervigilance of child protection services towards care-experienced parents, validating the fears that many care-experienced parents have when engaging with services.



Parents with care-experience are constantly expected to prove themselves to professionals, despite often not being given the necessary support or being shown how to be effective parents. Care-experienced parents typically have good intentions and the drive to become good parents for their children, with many reporting that having a child of their own is their opportunity to 'break the cycle' (Either, 2022). Parsons et al., (2024) examined the long-term outcomes of care-leavers who became parents and their children, using data from the 1970 British Cohort Study and the 2000/02 Millennium Cohort Study, both of which included information on health, educational, and socioeconomic circumstances. The evidence shows us that while mothers who had experienced out-of-home care (OHC) had a lower socioeconomic status, less psychosocial resources available to them, and typically did not perceive themselves as good parents, there was no significant difference between care-experienced mothers and controls regarding their ability to provide a safe and stable home for their children. No significant differences were found between OHC and non-OHC mothers regarding the following measures of parenting suitability: using drugs or drinking alcohol frequently, living in an overcrowded or messy home, having a regular schedule for their child, attendance at antenatal classes, being unhappy about becoming pregnant, or having a baby with low birthweight. This tells us that care-experienced parents overwhelmingly have the desire to give their children a safe and nurturing home but may require extra support to be at their best.

What care-experienced parents need

When young people leave care, they are often referred on to several services that do not coordinate with each other, creating barriers and increasing anxiety, which may cause the young person to disengage altogether from formal services providing income, housing, education, and employment support (Purtell et al., 2022). This, combined with distrust of services stemming from experiences of the care system as a whole, means that what parents *do not* need is more professionals in their lives. Both research and care-experienced parents themselves tell us that what they need most is more informal social support. Having supportive social relationships is a crucial protective factor for parents and their children, helping to prevent negative outcomes and increase parental self-efficacy (Either, 2022).

A study by Leahy-Warren et al., (2009) found that informal social support had a positive, significant effect on self-efficacy in new mothers, which in turn was significantly correlated with lower levels of postnatal depressive symptoms. This correlation was not significant, however, with respect to professional support. Mothers benefitted from four types of support – emotional, informational, appraisal (i.e. reassurance and encouragement), and instrumental (i.e. practical support with parenting responsibilities). For most mothers, partners, their own mother, and friends offered all four types of support. Further, another study, by



Nunes et al. (2020), found that a parent's support network consisted of, on average, nine people. For care-experienced parents, this support network is likely to be much smaller, which impacts negatively on emotional wellbeing, self-efficacy, and ease of meeting the demands of parenthood.

In a study by Roberts et al., (2019), in which the researchers heard input from professionals who work with care-experienced parents, one team manager reported finding it hard to see "the lack of moral support. [Parents] having kind of no trustworthy adult about to kind of guide them through things and to, to be a crutch or a shoulder to cry on" (p. 15). Care-experienced parents have also noted feeling that they do not have others in their support network who understand their unique experience as parents with experience of care. Parents have said that they sometimes have trouble connecting fully with those in typical parent and child groups, and that there is a need for support networks that provide a safe space specifically for care-experienced parents (Care Journeys, 2022).

Introducing 'The Village'

The Village is an online support network for care-experienced parents in Scotland. The Village was created with a focus on relationships and the impact they can have on care-experienced people who are transitioning to and navigating parenthood. Through this community, parents can link in with team members for informal, yet informed, one-to-one support or connect with other parents and offer support to each other. Parents also have the option of becoming involved in the peer mentoring programme, in which mentees can meaningfully connect with someone who has had similar parenting experiences to them, while mentors can continue to build their confidence and develop their skillset.

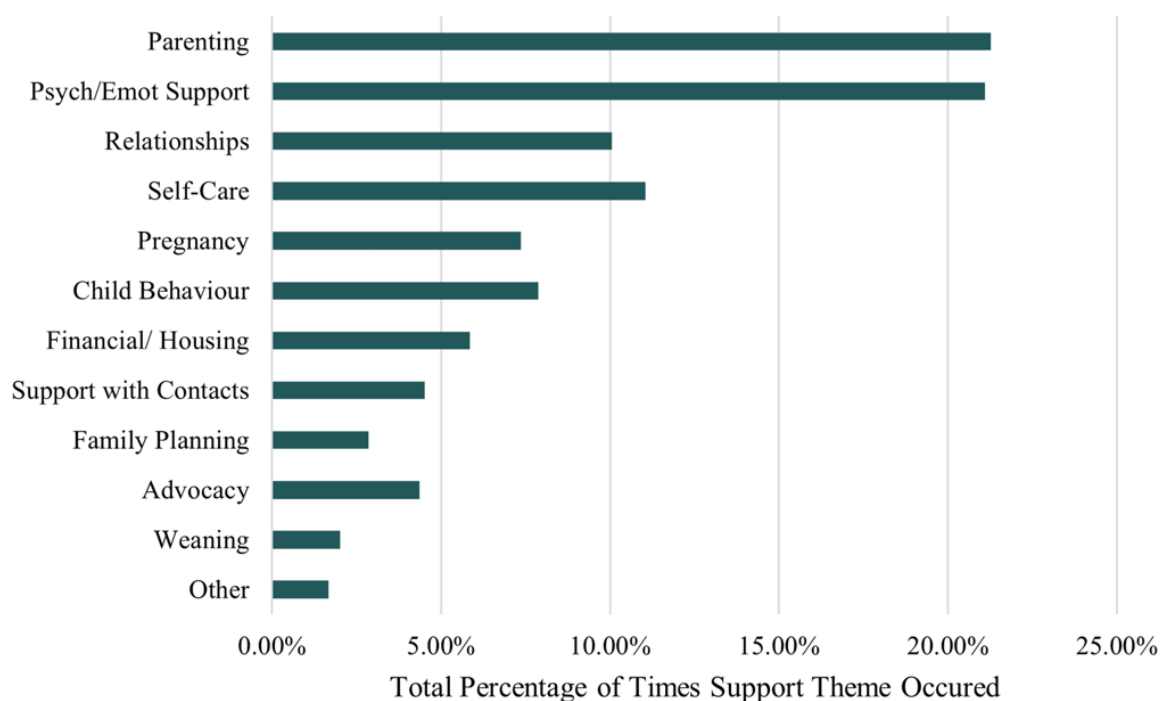
The Village operates almost fully online through whichever means is most accessible for the parents themselves, whether this be through Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, or WhatsApp. This allows us, for one, to support those in geographical areas where resources can be limited. Further, it is known that many parents rely on the internet for information and social support, and may even be more likely to turn to it than to their own families for parenting information and advice (Doty & Dworkin, 2014). Online communities provide parents with the benefit of immediate advice and reassurance, where they can feel validated through sharing and storytelling with other parents who are having similar experiences (Doty & Dworkin, 2014; Haslam et al., 2017). One study found that parents consistently preferred informal information and advice from other parents over expert sources, because they viewed lived experience as more valuable (Doty & Dworkin, 2014).



Team member support

The parents, or ‘villagers,’ can interact with team members as much or as little as they wish and choose for themselves what support they want to receive. Team members provide one-to-one support through calls and messages, and support received by villagers encompasses all four previously mentioned types (emotional, informational, appraisal, and instrumental). Villagers have benefitted from parenting advice and tips, emotional and psychological support, and help navigating systems such as government entitlements, social services, and housing. **Figure 1** illustrates the most common support themes, as reported by team members weekly between January and July 2024.

Figure 1: Weekly Support Themes of Villagers Linking with Team Members for 2024



It is worth noting that, as The Village is a community and not a service, all conversations with team members are fully confidential, and records on parents are never shared unless there is a serious safeguarding concern. This allows the team to build trusting relationships with parents and ensure that support is fully centred around their needs.

Peer mentoring

In addition to support from team members, parents have the option of engaging with the peer mentoring programme. This resulted from a consultation with care-experienced parents who told The Village team that they would benefit from having someone who could relate more closely to their experiences whilst



still being unbiased and maintains confidentiality. Peer mentoring has been found to improve outcomes relating to babies and children, increase self-efficacy in mothers, and reduce depressive symptoms (Law et al., 2022; McLeish & Redshaw, 2017). In a qualitative study by Law et al. (2022) on a 'mummy buddy' programme in Australia, mothers reflected on the benefits of having a peer mentor, stating that both family and friends, as well as professionals, can carry stigma and have an 'agenda' when providing support. Peer mentoring, alternatively, is informal but still contains some boundaries, where mothers can have someone to open up to without worrying about judgement from those in their personal network. Through the peer mentoring programme, care-experienced parents can become a mentor or be mentored themselves, depending on their needs, goals, and confidence.

Experiences of parents in The Village

In the remainder of this paper, I explore the experiences of parents who currently receive support from The Village and identify what they believe the largest impacts of this support have been. The main research questions identified before starting the study were: do parents find the support they receive from The Village useful? What effects has being part of The Village had on their perceived confidence in parenting, emotional wellbeing, and social support? However, with this being an exploratory study of parent experiences, the additional theme of impact was welcomed.

Method

Participants

All villagers had the opportunity to respond to surveys and/or participate in one-to-one interviews with the author to talk about their experience of being in The Village, what benefits they have seen, and what they would like to see improved. Parents were recruited by the author, their team members, or through social media. Twenty-two parents participated – about 30% of the total number of villagers. Despite being a self-selected sample, proportions of gender and minority status were exactly equal to the villager population as a whole. Age groups of parents in the study and those in the wider Village community were near equal, although skewed slightly younger proportionally, as at the time only two villagers were under the age of 18, one of whom participated in this study. A demographic summary of those who participated in surveys and/or interviews is shown in **Table 1**.



	N = 22	%
Gender		
Male	2	9.09%
Female	20	90.91%
Ethnicity		
White UK	21	95.45%
Asian	1	4.55%
Age		
16 - 17	1	4.55%
18 - 25	11	50.0%
26+	10	45.45%
Employment Status		
Unemployed	16	72.73%
In education or training	1	4.55%
Working part-time	4	18.18%
Working full-time	1	4.54%
Relationship Status		
Single	11	50.0%
In relationship (with someone who shares parenting responsibilities)	11	50.0%
Number of Children		
0 (miscarried)	1	4.55%
1	10	45.45%
2	7	31.82%
3+	4	18.18%
Ages of Children		
	N = 39	
Pregnant or Under 1	7	17.95%
1 - 3	13	33.33%
3 - 5	5	12.82%
5+	14	35.90%

Table 1: Demographics of Parent Sample

Procedure

Twenty parents completed a survey and five participated in a one-to-one interview, with three parents doing both. All participants consented to having their anonymised data and feedback included in reports. Those who completed interviews received a £15 voucher for their time.

The survey included open-ended questions, asking what parents have found most beneficial about being part of The Village, and what more they would like to see offered. Interviews were semi-structured and lasted up to 30 minutes. Questions centred around parents' experiences in joining The Village, any overall impacts on their wellbeing, and suggestions for further improvement of the community. Questions were intentionally left broad and open-ended to allow for all possible types of impact to come up in discussion, especially as The Village offers such a breadth of personalised support.

The surveys were administered, and interviews conducted by a researcher who had not been involved in supporting parents, and therefore had no prior knowledge of any of the participants. All feedback was anonymised prior to



being shared with anyone else in The Village team, in order to maintain confidentiality. All the parents who participated in interviews were linked in with a dedicated team member for support. Therefore, if parents found sharing their experiences to be triggering or distressing, they could readily access support to further process this.

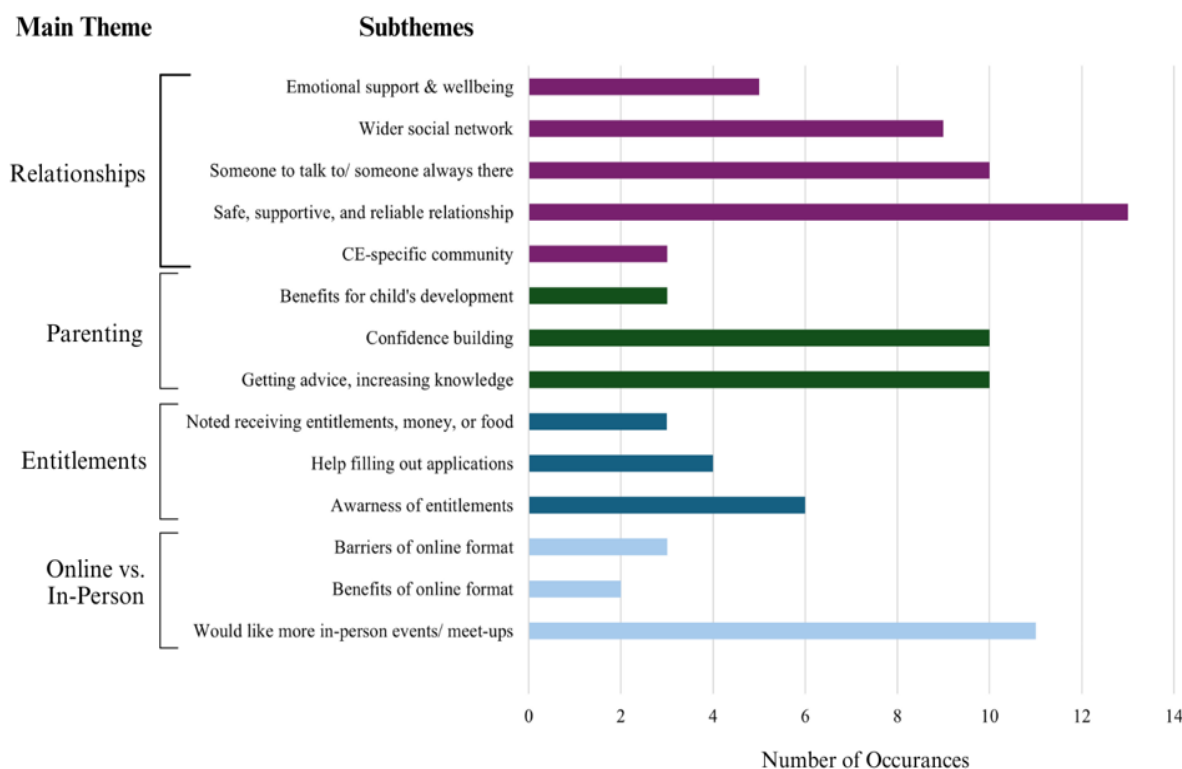
Analysis

A thematic analysis was completed for both written survey responses and individual interviews. Interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim, then broken down into individual lines to be analysed alongside written survey responses. For parents who completed both a survey and an interview, repeated information was omitted from analysis. The author followed Braun and Clarke’s (2006) six steps of thematic analysis: familiarising self with data, generating codes, finding themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and analysing findings.

Findings

The following key themes regarding what parents benefitted from most were identified through the analysis: relationships, parenting, and entitlements. In terms of suggestions for improvement, the theme of wanting more in-person opportunities to connect with other parents was the only one identified. A summary of main themes and subthemes is shown in **Figure 2**.

Figure 2: Summary of themes generated by parent feedback on surveys and interviews



Relationships and social network

The most frequently generated subthemes fell under the main theme of one's relationships and social networks. Parents often commented on how important it is to them that they can have a safe and supportive relationship with their team member, and that the relationship is a reliable one. Villagers appreciate having someone checking in on them regularly as well as someone that they can trust to confide in about any issues they are having. Many used the phrase 'having someone to talk to,' implying that sometimes it is enough to know that someone is always there on the other end of the phone if they need it.

Just having someone else that you can have a normal relationship with over the phone or that you can call and be like 'I don't know how to do that, help.' I think the relationship just with, like, [team member] has been really helpful because I can just message her and be like, can we meet up for a coffee or something or can I have a rant to you.

My daughter had to go through surgery on her eyes, and even [team members] were checking in. It was dead nice to have people from the Village checking in to make sure she was okay.

For some villagers, they felt that having this consistent and trusted relationship in their lives positively impacted their emotional wellbeing. For many, having an unbiased person there to vent to and share their struggles with is indispensable.

I think that's therapy in itself and a stress reliever, you can just message and be like, 'this happened today, can I get this off my chest' or whatever. It means you're not keeping stuff pent up and you're getting it off your shoulders and not just dwelling on stuff.

One parent had suffered a miscarriage, and noted the benefit of the support she got from her team member following this, saying:

Speaking with [team member] about it has helped my emotional wellbeing a lot. I'm feeling a lot better within myself because I've had that person to speak to about everything that's going on. It still hurts, but I feel a lot better than I did before.

Some parents also mentioned having a wider social network as a result of joining The Village. Parents reflected on connections they have formed with other parents, for example through meetups or the free baby massage classes that The Village provides in one local authority. Parents talked about how it feels to have a supportive, like-minded community around them.

I feel like I have an amazing support system that helps me grow within myself and as a parent, without judgement.

A few parents noted that they appreciated being part of a community that is specifically for care-experienced parents. One parent reflected on how



meaningful it is to know there are other parents out there who have had a similar experience due to being care-experienced.

It is really helpful having a safe space to turn to as a care-experienced parent. I don't have family support other than from my husband. As fortunate as I am to have a loving husband, I do feel quite alone sometimes. It can be isolating being a care-experienced parent because it is hard connecting with other parents who don't have that shared experience.

Parenting

Themes around parenting mostly centred around parents being able to access advice and enhance their parenting knowledge. Some felt that this, in turn, increased their confidence in their ability to be good parents.

When [child] was a bit younger, so in terms of like teething and weaning, I would message them and ask for advice and they would give me advice and a lot of times their advice worked, which I was grateful for.

They've been really good in helping me build my confidence. I have a seven year age difference between my two children so when I had my second one I was a bit like, oh gosh, I don't know what I'm doing even though I've done this before. So just having them there to speak to about that kind of stuff was really good.

For some, all they needed was that extra bit of reassurance that they are doing well as parents to their children.

Just the reassurance that you're doing things right, or even just people saying that you're doing a good job, that's nice to hear. It does give you confidence in your parenting.

Some also mentioned seeing benefits for their child's development. Those taking the baby massage classes in particular could see a difference in their babies' behaviour after participating. One parent told us that the team member who leads the classes has taught her a lot about child development, and she has learned techniques that she is able to implement at home.

Entitlements

A major theme for parents is that of receiving practical support through applying for and being granted benefits and financial support. This is crucial for many villagers who may be struggling to cover the costs of food, utilities, or childcare. Parents told us that through The Village's online pages and team members, they often became aware of funding and opportunities that they would not have known of otherwise.

I'm getting support with things I didn't know existed, and with applications and getting proof that I'm care experienced.



Others mentioned that their team member was instrumental in navigating different services and filling out applications. Some received direct support from The Village, through food vouchers or packs.

Doing the process here with the nurseries and the forms, I've had to message them a couple times and ask 'what do I do?' and they get back to me as soon as they can which is always pretty fast. And recently they came to me and asked if I have prepaid meters in the house because they could apply for some funding to get some vouchers for your gas or electricity. So, we were lucky enough to get some vouchers for our gas as well.

Barriers and facilitators of online community

Parents consistently told the author that what they would like to see improved by The Village is creating more opportunities for parents to meet and socialise in-person. This was the only change that parents discussed wanting to see across survey responses and interview conversations.

The parents who asked for more in-person meetups noted that the predominantly online format of The Village can be a barrier to making those connections with other parents that can turn into friendships. One parent, who has been to one of The Village meetups in the past and noted it was a very positive experience, said that the in-person interactions are needed, especially at the beginning, to build trust and a sense of community.

The only thing I'd like to see improved is just to meet up more. In terms of like, out to the park, places that are free and things like that. Meeting up where there's a big group of you and you all feel safe and you know everybody is looking out for each other.

Some parents agreed that the in-person meetups are important so that they can feel comfortable taking that extra step to turn the connections they make into friendships and to communicate independently.

I've only met [other villagers] twice in person so I don't think I'd be confident to be like 'oh add me on Facebook'. I think there would have to be a couple more meetups for that.

Despite this, parents also acknowledged that The Village's online modality has its benefits. Parents mentioned immediacy of support and feeling more comfortable talking with team members as the main facilitators due to being able to communicate online.

I think that's the good thing about it that it can just be through the phone, just a message, so it's not as if they phone or things like that. It's more comfortable just being able to send a wee text message here and there.



For a couple of parents, the online format is ideal due to mental health concerns, such as anxiety, making it more difficult for them to get out and connect with others in-person.

I can't really get out of the house much because of my anxiety, so just the concept of having it all online is really good.

Discussion

The findings of the analysis highlight that there is a largely unmet need for informal, social support for parents with experience of care. Those who do receive such support report benefitting greatly from it, as they are able to get the additional help they need in a context that is non-stigmatising and without the fear that their support needs will be used against them.

The themes brought up by parents in The Village strongly reflect those that Leahy-Warren et al. (2009) observed the majority of non-care-experienced parents get from their existing social network of family and friends. As some villagers discussed themselves, care-experienced parents typically do not have access to the same breadth of people to include in their 'village.' Therefore, it cannot be assumed that care-experienced parents have someone to talk to about their struggles, or somewhere to get the everyday, lived experience advice that the average parent may take for granted. This is how informal support networks like The Village can make a difference, as team members, peer mentors, and other parents fill these necessary roles.

In addition to having someone to talk to and ask questions of, parents further benefitted from tangible supports that, without access to, parents would find meeting the basic needs of their family much more difficult. The impact of financial support cannot be understated, especially for parents with experience of care who may not have been given the best start in their transition to adulthood. Many parents talked about struggling with money, and how small contributions like food or fuel vouchers, or larger savings like council tax refunds and free childcare, made a profound difference in reducing their stress and having the space to focus fully on their children. In Scotland, many entitlements and benefits exist for care-experienced parents, but many do not know what options are available to them. Again, this is when having a trusted relationship with someone who can help to navigate complex systems is a major help to parents.

The one, overwhelming request for improvement of The Village that the majority of parents we spoke to asked for, as mentioned above, was to have more in-person opportunities to spend time with other parents in the community. Generated themes told us that while the online-dominant modality has its benefits, an online social network often does not replace the strength of connections made with others in-person. Since completing surveys and



interviews, this suggestion has been taken forward, with The Village team arranging regular meetups in local communities for groups of villagers. For example, one parent suggested 'walk and talks' in a local park that run every two weeks, and these have been taken up by a number of parents. Parents who have met through these meetups have taken their friendships further, supporting each other independently of Village team member mediation. This is ultimately the goal in working with care-experienced parents – to build a network of other care-experienced parents where they can share their experiences and learning and offer each other help.

Limitations

There are some limitations of this study that must be considered. For one, the sample was self-selected, and therefore it is possible that the most engaged parents were the ones who volunteered to participate, with their higher level of engagement possibly meaning they are more likely to have positive experiences, which could bias results. However, as The Village does not require anyone to share their story and parents can volunteer as little or as much information as they choose, it is reasonable to assume that the experiences that were shared by participants in this study were representative of how they genuinely felt about the support received. Further, the small sample size decreases the representativeness of this sample and may mean findings cannot be generalised to all parents who engage with The Village.

Another limitation is that there was some overlap between those who completed surveys and interviews, as it was decided that the interviews would be held after the surveys had already circulated. The author attempted to correct for this by removing any pairs of matching lines that were written and said by the same person in their survey and interview. Further, because surveys and interviews were analysed together, and fewer people participated in interviews but contributed a greater volume of feedback, the responses of those five participants may hold more weight in the analysis than of those who only completed surveys.

Finally, this study did not use a control group or include care-experienced parents outside of those in The Village. There is, however, a benefit to having a built-in group of parents for this study through The Village. The author, having worked alongside The Village team, is aware of the types and quality of support provided to parents on an ongoing basis, and thus which outcomes were most likely to have been facilitated specifically by The Village.

Conclusion

This paper highlights the need for informal, nonjudgemental, and comprehensive support for care-experienced parents. The feedback given to us by parents supported by The Village demonstrates that The Village provides a useful model



for how such support networks can function. Those who work with care-experienced parents should be guided by what support the parents tell them they need, providing this with a focus on helping the parent grow and develop their skills. Overall, the end goal should be the facilitation of care-experienced parents forming trusted relationships with each other, so that they can get much of their required support without intervention from professionals.

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