



Centre for excellence
for looked after children in Scotland

Initial evaluation of the 'Why Not?' initiative developed by Care Visions

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Table of Contents

Introduction and background	2
Current policy and practice context	3
This analysis.....	4
The data and sample	4
The approach.....	4
Findings	4
Theme 1: Professional identity, vocation, and display.....	5
Theme 2: Exploring, describing, and mapping relationships	6
Theme 3: Experiencing relationship changes and challenges	8
Theme 4: The role of rights and outcomes.....	9
Conclusions	11
References	13

I think for them, the benefits are having stable people like us in their lives. I don't think you can put into words just how much that would mean to them, 'cos most of them have got no one if it wasn't for us. [...] Then, I suppose that's a benefit for me as well, that I get to see it, I get that warmth, that I am part of something that if it wasn't for people like us doing it, they wouldn't have anyone. (Quote from interview)

Introduction and background

This short document provides a summary of initial learning from data gathered for an evaluation of the Why Not? initiative. The study was commissioned by the social care organisation Care Visions. The document should be read alongside the literature review entitled *In and beyond the care setting: relationships between young people and care workers*. The review summarises key findings from literature and policy that are relevant to the concept and delivery of the Why Not? initiative.

Care Visions was established in Scotland in 1998 to provide specialist residential care for children in small group homes. The provision is based on a therapeutic model termed the 'Sanctuary Model' (www.carevisionsresidential.co.uk/the-sanctuary-model). The organisation has since expanded, and now comprises 30 small residential services across Scotland and fostering services in Scotland and Ireland for 175 young people, as well as home care services in the North East of England, and dementia services in China.

The Why Not? initiative within Care Visions services was started in 2014 to 'improve the way young people are supported when ageing out of care, by offering a different experience of relationships beyond care' (www.carevisionsresidential.co.uk/why-not/). The aim of the scheme was to offer every young person leaving a Care Visions service a meaningful connection to a supportive adult, based on a relationship that has developed within the care setting and that is valued by the young person. The intention was that this relationship continues throughout the young person's transition from care and into adulthood. The stated aims were to reduce the sense of isolation and loneliness that is so often a feature of leaving care, and provide continuity of relationships at a time of change and disruption (Duncalf, 2010; Morgan & Lindsay, 2006; Stein, 2012a, 2012b). Relationships encompassed by the Why Not? initiative were to be open-ended, informal, 'natural', supportive relationships that endure over time.

The 'Why Not?' initiative was inspired by a model that emerged in New York in the mid 1990's, following concerns about the disproportionate number of homeless adults who had previously been in foster care. Pat O'Brien developed a programme in response to this issue that became the 'You Gotta Believe' movement (www.yougottabelieve.org). At the heart of the programme was the belief that no young person is 'unadoptable', such that the programme concentrates on finding permanent families for older children and young adults in foster care. You Gotta Believe has a particular focus on young people aged 16-21, and seeks to recruit substitute families based on the idea of 'moral adoption'. The concept of 'moral adoption' is an acknowledgement that, for many young people in long-term care, legal adoption is not appropriate, but they can be offered an 'unconditional, lifetime commitment' from a substitute parent figure (www.yougottabelieve.org/parenting/what-is-adoption/). This model was the starting inspiration for the Why Not? model, inspiring the aim of potentially life-long connections

where parties would experience a genuine sense of commitment and concern for each other.

Current policy and practice context

Current policy drivers, draw on a growing body of research and evidence of existing good practice examples, to set the enabling context and expectations that positive relationships are at the core of good quality continuing care and aftercare practice. For example, the Staying Put Scotland Guidance (Scottish Government, 2013) highlights the importance of maintaining relationships and attachments for young people transitioning from care to adulthood and interdependence. It encourages that relationships between young people and carers are continued and maintained wherever possible. This means that workers and carers should be encouraged and supported to maintain contact if they change job, or if the young person leaves care or moves to a new placement. The philosophy of care underpinning Staying Put Scotland also informed the changes in aftercare systems brought about by the Children & Young People (Scotland) Act 2014.

A recent report by The Fostering Network (Swain, 2016) again highlighted the importance of maintaining relationships for young people when transitioning from care or moving placement. Research clearly demonstrates that the transition period towards independence is when looked after young people and care leavers are at their most vulnerable. Growing pockets of good practice are challenging the notion of a bureaucratic transitioning of young people, and placing ongoing relationships at the heart of their care planning.

The recent cross-sector Relationships Matter Project¹ brought together practitioners and young people from a range of agencies and care providers, to demonstrate how relationship-based practice was being embraced, and the positive impact this was having on young people's well-being and support into adulthood. It positively addressed some of the perceived practical and ethical challenges, and reflected a positively changing landscape in Scotland.

Relationship-based practice will also be at the heart of the Care Inspectorate's revised inspection and improvement model for children services, of particular importance in terms of creating the supportive and enabling context, and encouraging the development of a new norm.

¹ <http://blogs.iriss.org.uk/relationships-matter/ideas/jam-application/>



This analysis

This report offers an analysis of data collected between the start of the evaluation (September 2016) and the time of writing (late 2017). Readers should not see this report as a full evaluation of the initiative; instead, it is a snapshot based on a relatively small amount of data. However, we are able to provide an independent view and the data are sufficient to provide an initial sense of the initiative and raise interesting questions that could be considered further in Care Visions' in-house evaluations.

The data and sample

The data and information used to underpin this analysis include six one-to-one interviews with connectors and young people, various project documents supplied for analysis, field notes from activities attended / observed, and researcher notes from six meetings with Why Not? / Care Visions leaders (three evaluation research meetings and three advisory group meetings). All of the connectors interviewed were from residential care backgrounds².

The approach

Given the narrative and textual nature of these data, the analysis is qualitative and uses an approach known as Thematic Analysis, whereby a number of prevalent or useful themes are identified and reported drawing on a range of data. In places we provide quotes taken from interviews; we hope these help to affirm, explain, or contextualise the points made.

Given the small numbers of participants from different groups, special care has been taken to avoid accidentally disclosing the identity of participants and all quotes are attributed only to generic levels rather than participant type and identifying details have been edited.

Findings

We remind readers that these findings are tentative, based as they are on a small amount of data. This is therefore formative evaluation that we hope will prove helpful both in the development of Why Not? and in its on-going evaluation. We present our findings under four themes avoiding aspects where we would have less confidence in our observations.

² Care Visions additionally intends to offer Why Not? to foster children in future. We would caution that if foster children and carers are included, their experiences may be markedly different to the participants included here – particularly with reference to Theme 1 below.

Theme 1: Professional identity, vocation, and display

All participants felt that Why Not? was the 'right' thing to do for young people. There is a strong ideological commitment that is linked to a particular view of residential care workers incorporating a unique set of professional values based on an ethic of care (Holland, 2010).

In this view, residential care is more than a simple paid occupation, it is a professional vocation that pervades (or should pervade) the wider identity of the individual worker and potentially other aspects of their lives. This extension beyond the paid aspects of the work was clearly reflected in the strong sentiment that it is 'natural' for genuine relationships to continue rather than end solely because a period of care had ended. In this way, involvement with Why Not, becomes central to identity as a professional residential care worker and as a human being. Furthermore, involvement in Why Not? 'displays' a set of values, signalling to young people (among others) that relationships are real and providing care is more than just a job:

[...] young people feel they mattered when they were in care, not just for the money [wages], they feel valued and know it is not just a job. (Interview)

Equally, there are aspects of display linked to the organisation. The existence of Why Not? within Care Visions:

[...] shows we as an organisation really care, relationships are real, and we are properly caring for young people. (Interview)

The wider context and literature suggest that Why Not? is a timely reflection of emerging trends within residential child care. Even so, older views are still evident in some parts of the sector and clearly not all connected with residential care will be instantly comfortable with these changes. This reflects the anxiety expressed by some participants, who felt on-going relationships with young people were, until recently, viewed with suspicion:

It was really, really, frowned upon that anybody kept in touch with young people once they left care. And I just thought that was awful! I thought it was cruel actually, to be quite honest with you. (Interview)

Despite the recognition of censure, participants also acknowledged that continued relationships had always been part of the landscape of residential care. The structure and support provided by Why Not? now provided a level of assurance to connectors that their continued relationships were in some way recognised and validated. This may be of particular importance for workers who move on to employment with other care providers.

The next stages of evaluation might wish to consider exploration of how emerging evidence from Why Not? can effectively contribute to changing attitudes across and beyond Care Visions. For example, using widely visible means such as conference

presentations, blogs, and other publications as well as through targeted discussions with key stakeholders such as professional organisations, legislators, and regulators.

Future evaluation may also choose to look at how best to support individual connectors (and prospective connectors) with anxieties and exposures counter-views. In order to build (and potentially defend) a valid professional identity, workers involved with Why Not? must draw on a coherent evidence-informed model of relationships within residential life. Some may achieve this through exposure to consistent role models, others through formal training, and the literature review that accompanies this report may be helpful in this. It seems likely that support that enables workers to make links between formal codified learning and aspects of their own practice will be helpful; this might be achieved through coaching or during appropriate professional supervision.

Theme 2: Exploring, describing, and mapping relationships

Each young person may have several connections that work in very different ways; similarly, each connector may connect to several young people in diverse ways. Drivers of these differences appear to involve the quality and nature of the existing relationship, whether they are or were directly cared for by the connector, how recently there has been a direct relationship, and so on. It is clear that each connection is a unique relationship resulting from the unique dyad.

In exploring the nature of relationships a diversity of types were identified, participants were asked to compare their connections to other forms of relationships they knew about. Notwithstanding the difficulty of consistently defining 'family', relationships broadly fell into those that compared to family and those that compared to non-family. Familial type relationships were generally near-family relationships and included a generational element - such that whilst both parental and grandparental analogues were given, aunt/uncle was not used and only one participant recognised a possible similarity to an age-disparate sibling relationship to suggest big brother/sister. Non-familial relationships tended to focus on a professional or quasi-professional roles (e.g. advocate, counsellor, teacher, or mentor) rather than being based as solely a non-familial friendship.

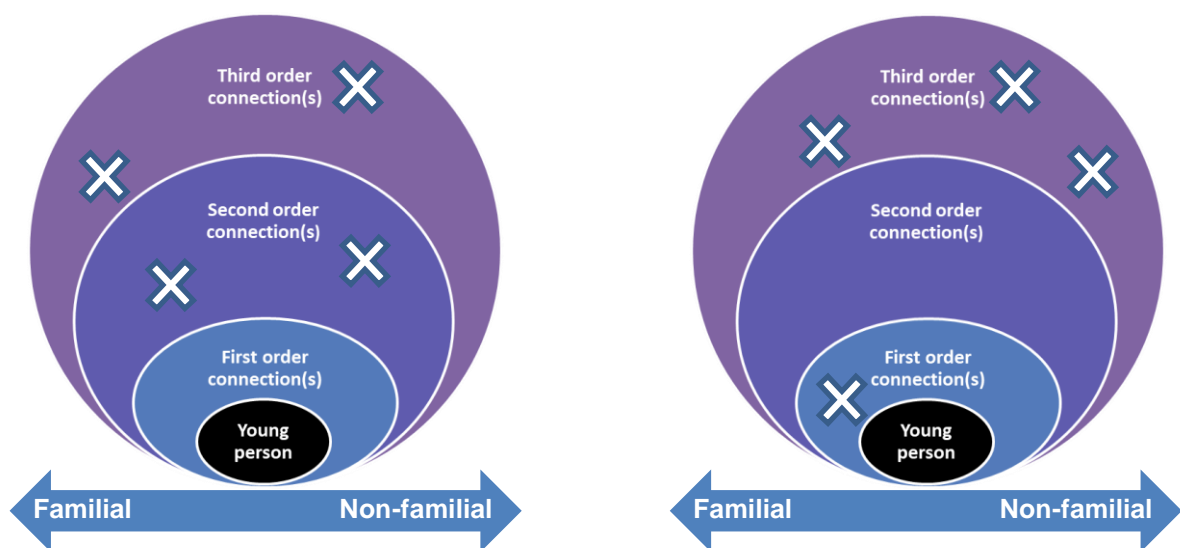
Participants described meaningful relationships that seem to have very low intensity, perhaps with months going by without contact. This contrasts with those that were based on very frequent contacts, perhaps including text exchanges several times a week along with spending significant amounts of time together on a weekly basis and integration into the connector's family. Frequency of contact was also partly related to the idea of 'closeness' and the extent to which the connection was part of day to day life. Other aspects of closeness might include the extent to which connectors shared aspects of their own lives with young people or preferred to keep some separation. For example, in some relationships connectors wanted to include young people in their family activities, in others this did not currently feel relevant to the relationship.

Together these differences may go part way to helping us to understand the nature and extent of reciprocity. The data suggest that the concept of reciprocity was important to participants, such that notionally there could be give and take in each relationship. However, in common with other relationships, the connections could be somewhat asymmetrical; for example, while many connectors provided birthday gifts for young people, not all of them told young people when it was their own birthday. Equally, when they went out together, it was usually the connector who paid, particularly in the early stages of the connection.

This is not to say that connectors did not gain through these relationships (see Theme 4).

One way to think about these relationships is offered in Figure 1. This shows fictional relationships for two different young people, each with four connections (marked by crosses). Each cross maps the degree of closeness (here shown as 1st, 2nd or 3rd order connections) and the extent to which each relationship is family-like. Ideally, the young person would describe each relationship. In this example, the first imagined young person had no very close connections, but two moderately close relationships and two less close; their connections included both family-like and non-familial relationships. By contrast, the second imagined young person is shown as having one very close family-like connection and three less close connections two of which were non-familial.

Figure 1: Mapping connections for two imagined young people



Some participants suggested that certain types of network pattern or arrangement might suit different young people: for example, it may be preferable for some to have at least one very close connection (familial or otherwise) rather than several second order connections. These participants tentatively felt that it could be possible to make a special attempt to design a set of connections most likely to help, or deliver one that reflected the personal preferences that young people express about maintaining different types of network arrangement.

On-going evaluation may therefore like to further explore the idea of mapping connection networks to see if this adds value, and also ascertain whether it is possible to 'engineer' a particular network of connections given these are intended in some way to be 'natural' relationships.

As well as the marked differences of relationship types between dyads, it was also apparent that relationships change over time. Whilst committed to the idea of a lifelong commitment to be available, some participants expected that in most cases, the intensity of the relationship would decrease over a number of years; for example, as a young person finds new interests or begins a family of their own. The exception was, participants who described very close family-like relationships; they tended to expect these to continue to be close, or even become closer over time. Similarly, some participants noted a tendency for some connections to 'go quiet' for extended periods, followed by a more intense time; they suggested this was usually in response to a particular issue the young person was experiencing at the time.

Theme 3: Experiencing relationship changes and challenges

Participants were aware that they had finite capacities, and some were concerned about the implications of potentially having to decline (or limit) a connection with a young person in the future:

Well, you always get the option, but I don't know how you would feel that about it, you may be letting the young person down if you say no, they might judge what you say, and others may judge. (Interview)

The concern about accumulating many connections may be less for those who anticipated relationships would gradually fade over time:

In addition to the call on their time and energy, some connectors also noted that there were financial implications for them as they may occasionally provide a little spending money, and regularly buy gifts, coffees, or meals. If they did the same for several young people, this could be difficult; in this circumstance, they hoped that the young person would understand their limits:

[...] and I took him out to pizza hut for lunch. But that's on me, that's my money, but then we made the decision, as he was working, that I treat you one time, then you treat me the next time, even if it is just a coffee. (Interview)

Some participants had already found it difficult to always provide the response young people wanted. However, participants noted that young people are implicitly inexperienced and may have difficulties in managing personal relationships. Reflecting on these issues, participants discussed the importance of early agreement about how any connection would work. They also stressed the importance of support when diverging expectations caused friction in the relationship.

The point at which the young person leaves care seems to be a particular point at which support may be needed. At this point that the connector and young person shift from a professional relationship to a new model, even if they have a long standing relationship and they have carefully agreed how the connection will work, participants felt that being faced with this new reality can require some adjustment:

It can take some time to find a new slot for the relationship, at least until it just becomes the norm. (Interview)

Similarly, other points that mark a significant change in the circumstances of the young person or the connector may require changes in the relationship or how it is enacted. It was clear that in some dyads there had been stressful times and a significant amount of emotional work and relationship learning was occurring. These experiences may be difficult for connectors or young people:

I was upset about [...] messages, but got support from [colleague], I needed that support. Other connectors may have cut [the young person] off. Sometimes they need to test you. (Interview)

It seems that some of the participants had used the Why Not? structures for support. Others valued their availability, as a 'safety net' should it become necessary. However, participants also noted that the personal nature of a one-to-one relationship might make it difficult to seek advice from a third party.

On-going evaluation may wish to explore in more detail what young people expect and hope for from their connections and how connections can be supported during difficult periods.

Theme 4: The role of rights and outcomes

All participants were aware of the needs and challenges that care leavers often face. In particular, they cited a need for a sense of continuity, belonging, and permanence, as well as a need to develop and maintain trusting relationships, in addition to a plethora of practical challenges concerning housing, income, stigma, and general life skills. Participants noted that care leavers might not have family resources:

[Why Not? is] trying to give them a lifelong connection, a sustained support system for them. We know evidence says care leavers don't have the best outcomes, we know they've not got support systems, non-care leavers can go to parents or family for support after they have left home. (Interview)

These were all areas where young people were said potentially to benefit from their connections, such that having a connection could help to ameliorate the challenges that may otherwise prevent them from achieving better outcomes. Connectors spoke of various forms of practical advice and assistance they gave in helping young people

achieve goals, but above all, they spoke of the emotional support they gave and how this helped young people to feel they were genuinely valued and cared for:

[I think he gets] a feeling of safety and some grounding. He knows he has someone on his side. He might not like some of the things I say, but he knows what to expect. It is like having another family member. (Interview)

Furthermore, connectors appeared to derive benefits for themselves, including direct rewards such as enjoying the young person's company and feeling cared for, and indirect rewards such as feeling less upset by the loss of an important relationship or less anxious about people they continued to worry about:

I like that you get to be part of their lives, the good, and the bad. It is like I enjoyed the young girl who [had a major biographic event], getting to be part of that. I have seen, how they have thrived and grown up over the years since leaving care. (Interview)

[I like] knowing they are doing well, and being able to speak to them. It would be horrendous if you were not able to be part of their lives. To be wondering about them would be traumatic, I can't imagine not speaking to her. (Interview)

In some cases, participants portrayed profound loving relationships that provided a degree of mutual benefit.

Despite being able to explain Why Not? in terms of improving outcomes, participants differed in the extent to which they portrayed this as incidental or deliberate. On the one hand, continued relationships were appropriate because they helped to ameliorate the poor outcomes that many care leavers may otherwise experience. On the other hand, continued relationships were appropriate simply because it was natural to continue to be involved with someone you loved. In other words, carers and young people had a natural right to continue their relationship (perhaps analogous to the right to a private 'family' life):

I have known [individual for several years]. [...] I can't imagine any other way. I love her. She's a big part of my life. (Interview)

While these two ways of thinking about Why Not? are not mutually exclusive, there is clearly some tension between them and resolving the tension by deciding on a primary aim will be helpful in understanding and evaluating the success of the initiative.

Why Not? exists to support young people and workers to exercise their right to continue a valued relationship; doing so may lead to better outcomes for some connectors and young people.

Vs.

Why Not? exists to promote better outcomes for young people and connectors; we do this by supporting them to exercise their right to continue valued relationships.

Notwithstanding the fact that both aspects will need addressing, where the emphasis is placed will have important implications for the focus of the on-going evaluation. We note that Care Visions is tracking various outcomes for young people involved with Why Not?

Conclusions

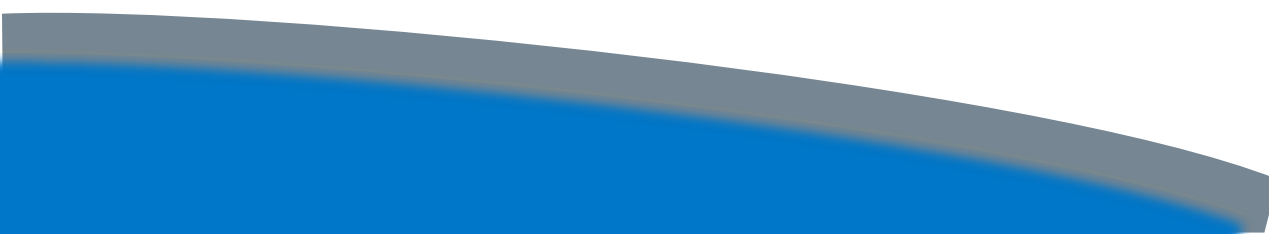
The initial stages of evaluation have incorporated exploration of literature, ascertaining the Why Not? model as planned and experienced by a small number of study participants. We feel the fundamentals of the model reflect a sound desire to enable on-going, meaningful relationships. Doing this presents many challenges, and significant effort and learning have already occurred within the initiative.

So far, the evaluation has sought to provide a sounding board to those implementing Why Not, capturing some of the key learning generated, and facilitating access to evidence and emerging policy that may help in the initiative's on-going development. This evaluation report adds some emerging issues that we hope will challenge those involved to further consolidate thinking and continue to optimise its delivery.

Care Visions staff will undertake the next stages of evaluation. Throughout this document we have referred to areas where the evaluation may like to gather further information to develop or clarify the points we raise, We believe such an evaluation will help generate a deeper understanding of the initiative and how it is experienced, which in turn will allow for further improvement.

The evaluation will also wish to attend to measuring impact. We have already identified an inherent difficulty linked to clarifying what Why Not? is trying to achieve. It may be decided that Why Not? is about actualising a right to continue meaningful relationships. If so, the evaluation needs to focus on understanding this right, how it can be promoted, and what exercising it means to the people concerned. Or, it may be decided that Why Not? is about improving a range of outcomes, in which case the evaluation needs to consider what these outcomes may be, whether and how they can be measured and most crucially how they can be attributed to Why Not? This might require the use of controls, comparison groups, or else a detailed consideration of mechanisms and other significant variables. It is clear that Care Visions is keen to promote and measure good outcomes for young people.

We anticipate there will be further learning from the Why Not? initiative and its on-going evaluation. We look forward to hearing more and hope that this will contribute to a growing evidence base, open to all, relating to how best to support care leavers.



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About CELCIS

CELCIS, based at the University of Strathclyde in Glasgow, is committed to making positive and lasting improvements in the wellbeing of Scotland's children living in and on the edges of care. Ours is a truly collaborative agenda; we work alongside partners, professionals and systems with responsibility for nurturing our vulnerable children and families. Together we work to understand the issues, build on existing strengths, introduce best possible practice and develop solutions. What's more, to achieve effective, enduring and positive change across the board, we take an innovative, evidence-based improvement approach across complex systems.