

## School's out, or is it?

### Young people's views on staying on in education or training to 18

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#### Contact details

Anne Pinney (project manager<sup>1</sup>), Principal Policy Officer, Barnardo's  
020 8498 7725 | [anne.pinney@barnardos.org.uk](mailto:anne.pinney@barnardos.org.uk)

Alison Worsley (née Linsey), Parliamentary Adviser, Barnardo's  
020 8498 7742 | 07773 916197 | [alison.worsley@barnardos.org.uk](mailto:alison.worsley@barnardos.org.uk)

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#### Introduction

The Government recently consulted on proposals to raise the age of compulsory education or training to 18 years.<sup>2</sup> This is an ambitious agenda. Although 77% of 16-18 year olds stay on in education or training, just over 10% (206,000 young people in England) are not in education, training or employment (or 'NEET'). This proportion has risen slightly since the Labour Government was first elected in 1997, in spite of national targets and successive initiatives to encourage young people to continue learning.<sup>3</sup>

This briefing is based on research with 30 young people aged 13-18 years, in three Barnardo's alternative education and training services in the North East – Palmersville Training, The Base and B76. Creative workshops were used to explore their experiences of school, how and why they left and then came to re-engage through Barnardo's provision, as well as their views on the Government's proposals. The young people were invited to take part in making the DVD - 'Staying On' - which this briefing accompanies. Our thanks go to all who participated – particularly the young people themselves and the project workers.

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#### Key messages from the young people

1. Choice is critical – the fact that young people choose to engage in education or training is significant in motivating them to turn up and make the most of it.
2. Young people who rejected or were excluded from school do not want 'more of the same'. A stronger vocational offer is needed, with more work-based learning.
3. There need to be stronger support structures – starting in school – to ensure that the challenging circumstances in which some young people grow up do not undermine their education and future life-chances. Key workers (or similar) can play an important role in providing practical and emotional support.

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<sup>1</sup> The research was carried out by Barbara Robinson and Andrea Marie of Barnardo's Policy and Research Unit, and the DVD was made by Paul Carr.

<sup>2</sup> DfES, March 2007, *Raising Expectations: staying in education and training post-16*

<sup>3</sup> DfES, SFR 22/07. In 1997 8.5% of 16-18 year olds were NEET, in 2006 10.3% were.

4. Young people need adequate financial support if they are to stay on in education or training, especially those who live independently or have difficult family relationships – many of whom struggle to access the education maintenance allowance (EMA) and other benefits.

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## Next steps

This is the first briefing in a research project to explore the barriers to participation faced by vulnerable and 'hard to reach' young people and what works in re-engaging them in education and training. A fuller report will be published in Autumn 2008.

The research will inform our lobbying on the forthcoming Education and Skills Bill, which will raise the age to which young people must remain in education or training. It will include duties on young people to participate and on parents to take reasonable steps to ensure they do. There will also be a duty on employers to release young people for education and training, and an enforcement process and system of penalties.

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## What the young people told us

### The school years

Key criticisms of school focused on **poor relationships with teachers**, the perceived irrelevance of the curriculum, bullying and a lack of support for their wider needs – echoing issues raised in other research.<sup>4</sup> A common complaint was the perceived 'lack of respect' for pupils – young people resented being 'treated like a kid', by which they meant being expected to sit down and keep quiet, and the lack of respect shown for their opinions and preferences.

"At school they just expected you to basically sit down and get on with it, they were just 'right there's the work - do it'."

Many young people questioned the **relevance of the curriculum** to their lives and future careers. They did not see the value of subjects such as history and religious education and therefore considered them a waste of time.<sup>5</sup> This may also have reflected their difficulty in accessing the some subjects, as many had poor basic skills.

**Bullying** – verbal or physical - had a significant impact on the education and self-esteem of several of the young people.<sup>6</sup> One young man with learning difficulties had endured bullying from year 1 to year 11 and was finally excluded when he retaliated.

It was clear that many faced significant **barriers to participation** in school including special needs, family breakdown, bereavement, housing difficulties and substance abuse.

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<sup>4</sup> For example, Hosie, 2007; Sproson, 2003; Pearce and Hillman, 1998.

<sup>5</sup> Other research (IPPR, 1998; Morris, 1996) highlights the significance of the curriculum as an aggravating factor of disengagement from education.

<sup>6</sup> NACRO (2003) identified bullying as one of the three main reasons why children miss school.

"It was really hard for me to get to school in the morning so I was like, late every day, and that really mucked things up for me with my GCSEs and all that, cos I was in my last year."

"I wore hearing aids in school, I used to put my hand up and the teacher would just walk straight past us for wearing hearing aids and not give us any help at all."

Young people rarely referred directly to their family situations (perhaps because group workshops were used), but their comments reflected **the lack of a consistent, supportive adult presence** in their lives. They felt that schools could play an important role in supporting young people through difficult times, but that generally this was lacking – there had been ‘no-one to talk to’. Many highlighted the importance of friends as sources of emotional support.

"I didn't have no-one, like I didn't, couldn't feel like going up to other teachers and talking ... to them about the pressure and all that."

### **Disengaging from education**

The young people had ‘dropped out’ of mainstream education in a variety of ways. Often, the decision to leave was not a conscious choice but rather, the culmination of a gradual process of disaffection and disengagement – having fallen so far behind their classmates and lacking the grades (or perhaps the confidence) to continue on to a college course.

Experiences of **truancy** were common. Many had ‘skived off’ regularly, attributing this to their lack of interest in lessons, poor relationships with teachers and the influence of friends. There was a sense that it was easy to get away with and many acknowledged the damaging impact that it eventually had on their education.

"Officially left school last year, but (effectively) left school about two, three years ago."

Many had been **excluded** – most often for disruptive behaviour, but some said they were excluded because of poor grades or for trivial reasons, like wearing a lip stud.

Many linked their decision to leave to factors within school, as described above: bullying, lack of interest in the curriculum, poor relationships with teachers, poor grades – with most acknowledging the consequences of own behaviour, such as drug-taking. However, several mentioned events in their life outside school – such as family breakdown, having to leave home at 16 or having a child – as the main reason they left.

"Drugs took over us ... I just chose the wrong route ...and didn't go. I mucked my life up."

Most of the young people described an initial sense of relief at leaving school, followed by an anxious and uncertain period ‘in limbo’ - missing the daily contact with their school friends, lacking structure to their day, being ‘nagged’ by parents and struggling to make ends meet. For some, leaving school meant that their parents expected them to support themselves and move out of the family home, resulting in financial hardship.

"When I left school I moved house and attended the college near by. I had a relationship breakdown and moved. Then I had no where to live and stayed in a hostel until I went on to a supported housing scheme."

### **Getting back on track**

Most of the young people were referred to Barnardo's services through partner agencies, such as Connexions or social services. Others had found out about the service through word of mouth or outreach undertaken by project workers – including regular visits to local 'B&B' accommodation to meet new arrivals and the offer of informal 'drop-ins', advice and advocacy services, all providing a stepping stone to further engagement.

For the majority, their decision to join a Barnardo's service marked a turning point. Many expressed regret at their wasted school years and now saw the importance of education and training to their future life-chances. The young people also highlighted how they personally had changed as a result of their participation; many said they felt more confident and mature and several suggested they had become 'nicer' and 'kinder'.

"I've just realised I'm not going to get nowhere in life if I behave badly and that."

"The Base has changed my life. It's made me realise how important things are in my life. They have helped me get a drugs counsellor, make new friends and to meet new people."

"I've learnt quite a bit ... understanding, sharing, being polite, listening to other people's opinions, which I never really did, because I was quite stubborn and I would never listen!"

### **Comparisons with school**

The young people compared their experiences at school with Barnardo's provision, drawing out the differences which they felt were most significant.

Fewer rules and the **friendly and informal atmosphere** at the services made it easier for them to adapt to being back in education or training, and actually want to be there. They valued the respect shown for their choices and opinions. Many commented on how much better they got on with staff and peers (than in school), which for some, also contributed to improved family relationships. Several emphasised how much they enjoyed a strong sense of camaraderie with other young people 'in the same boat'.

"You get treated like a proper adult, you get to make new friends, you get to have a wide range of choices, so it's totally different."

The young people highlighted the extensive **practical and emotional support** provided at the services, which helped them to remain engaged on their chosen course. Key workers played a critical role in establishing a trusting relationship, building confidence and motivation and providing wide-ranging support and advice – from intensive work to improve basic skills, to help with housing difficulties, benefits eligibility, debt, substance abuse, sexual health and so on. The young people reported that their key workers were

*'always there for them'* and valued their open and honest approach.

"They actually sit down and take the time to actually listen to what you say and listen to the problems you've got with doing the work."

"It (having a key worker) makes a lot of difference because like he can help you like in lots of situations, like say you need a loan or something for some food ... and if you need to talk to someone, he's always going to be there."

The young people seemed pleased to be learning again and motivated to work towards qualifications which would enable them to go to college or gain a job. Nearly all were enrolled on courses, with many studying to improve core skills in numeracy, literacy and IT or following vocational modules, on site or at a local college or workplace. The fact that they had chosen to be there and that they were learning something that they perceived to be relevant to their future aspirations had an important motivating effect.

"It made me realise that there was more opportunities there, they actually find places for you and you can go to different activities with them and it keeps [you] out of bother."

"I'm doing warehousing at the minute, gradually to build up to my fork-lifting (qualification) and hopefully progress to a job."

All of the young people articulated their desire to move on to further learning or employment after Barnardo's and were optimistic about the futures. Their aspirations and expectations were generally realistic and similar to those of any teenager – a job, a house, a family – as well as cars and holidays!

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## **Making young people stay on in education and training to 18**

A minority of the young people supported or were ambivalent about the Government's proposals to raise the age of compulsory participation in education or training.

"I feel it's 50:50, it's good and bad. It's good because it gives more people the opportunity to stay on in school and get better grades and get better jobs and get more money in, but it's bad because some people might not want to do it and they're ... going to get in trouble by truancy."

Most opposed the proposals, associating them with their own largely negative experiences of school or in a few cases, college. They found it hard to understand that the alternative or work-based provision which they were currently in would count – assuming that all young people would be required to continue in school or college-based provision. This has implications for how the policy is communicated to young people - and for its delivery.

Key points to emerge were:

- **'Choice is best'** - the current system where young people have the opportunity to stay on if they wish is preferable to raising the age of compulsory participation. This research suggests that choice can have an important motivating effect on young people, making it

more likely that they will attend and achieve.

"The good thing is if you wanted to stay on, and you've got the chance to stay on, now you can, so why tell them that they have to? If you don't want to [it's] just going to waste time for the teachers and the pupils."

- The need for **stronger support structures** for vulnerable young people, to help them deal with issues which would otherwise block their participation – including money problems, homelessness, drugs and early parenthood. There was also a clear message about the need for **dedicated support workers in schools**, to provide practical and emotional support to help children to remain engaged in education, in spite of challenging life circumstances.
- The need for **relevant learning opportunities** – a far stronger vocational offer and ultimately, improved labour market conditions for young people. Being able to gain workplace experience and qualifications which could lead to employment had a motivating effect; 'taster' courses were also valued.

"Prepare pupils for the real world (life skills)."

- The importance of adequate **financial support**, particularly for those with difficult family relationships or living independently. The EMA was seen as unfair and many of the young people reported difficulties and delays in accessing their entitlement to this and other benefits. Many were concerned that being required to stay on until they were 18 would deny them the opportunity to earn a living and support themselves.

"We think the EMA should be increased because for some people who live by themselves it's harder ... some people have got their food, clothes and that to buy, so your money is practically gone straight away."

"See sense that kids aren't going to do it - they need to make a life and money."

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## **Barnardo's education services**

Barnardo's has been involved in education since 1867, when Thomas Barnardo founded a 'ragged school' for poor children in the East End of London. He went on to found a number of training centres to give young people the skills they would need to enter trades such as carpentry and leather-making, as well as two naval training schools.

Today, over two-thirds of our services have an educational component. Barnardo's alternative education services work with young people who have been excluded from or rejected mainstream education, helping to address underlying difficulties and giving them the opportunity to re-engage with learning. Barnardo's also provides vocational training and work-based learning, working in partnership with local employers, colleges and schools.