

What Works in Leaving Care? – Summary

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The 'What Works?' series

Some ways of dealing with problems work better than others. Every child has the right to expect that professionals intervening in their lives will do so on the basis of the best available knowledge. But the majority of interventions in social care are not evaluated before they are introduced. In that sense, much of the work done with children is an uncontrolled experiment.

Barnardo's has a special interest in evidence-based practice, that is, finding out what works, and ensuring that the interventions we and others make in children's lives are as good as they possibly can be.

As Roy Parker and his colleagues have pointed out:

'A hundred years ago, the benefits of providing separate care for deprived and disadvantaged children were thought to be self evident. It has since become increasingly apparent that unless outcomes in childcare can be adequately measured, we have no means of justifying the actions of social workers, which may have far reaching and permanent consequences for individuals.'

Qualitative work, and user studies, for which the UK has a good record, are important in understanding the processes which enable interventions to work well, and understand what service users most value. They do not, however, help us to know what interventions work best, or why.

In order to understand cause and effect - the relationship between a particular intervention and an outcome - randomised controlled trials are important. RCTs in the UK and North America include studies of day care, home visits, accident prevention, and other early childhood interventions.

The cohort studies, such as the National Child Development Study (NCDS) enable us to see who does well after a poor start in life, and understand what factors may lead to resilience.

Barnardo's What Works reports draw on a range of research designs and evaluations which suggest that particular interventions are worthwhile.

This report in brief

Statistics about young people leaving care make depressing reading. Although many care leavers go on to lead successful and fulfilling lives, some continue to struggle for years. They are more likely than non-care leavers to be unemployed and are over-represented in the prison population and among the homeless.

What Works in Leaving Care? reviews what we know about the effectiveness of leaving care services. It draws on studies mainly completed in the last 20 years to consider the following questions:

- What are the problems facing care leavers?
- What services are being provided?
- What are the outcomes of leaving care schemes?
- What works in theory and practice?
- What are the gaps in our knowledge?

The report also discusses three theoretical perspectives which provide ways of interpreting the empirical material reviewed - attachment theory, focal theory and life course analysis.

What are the problems facing care leavers?

There are key areas of difference between care leavers and other young people:

- Having to be independent at a much younger age
- Lower levels of educational achievement
- Higher unemployment rates
- Unstable career patterns
- Higher levels of dependency on welfare benefits
- Earlier parenthood
- Higher levels of emotional disturbance

While young people in the general population tend to live at home longer, usually until their early 20s, stay in fulltime education longer and delay becoming parents, young people leaving care have to cope with the challenges and changes of independence far earlier. Very few young people remain in placements beyond 18 and a majority leave at just 16 or 17 years of age. In short they have compressed and accelerated transitions to adulthood.

What are the services?

Specialist leaving care schemes have developed, particularly since the mid-1980s, to respond to the core needs of care leavers - for accommodation, finance, careers and support networks. Some schemes emphasise *independence*, aiming to train young people to manage on their own from 16 onwards with minimal support. Others emphasise *interdependence*, seeing leaving care as a psycho-social transition and aiming to develop interpersonal skills, self esteem and confidence in young people, with ongoing support.

In the UK and the USA there have been many evaluations of individual projects but less research into groups of schemes. A useful model for classifying and comparing schemes draws on three dimensions:

- Their approach to service delivery eg methods of working and the extent to which their work is young person demand led or social work planned
- What the providing agency is like – including its organisational, management and staffing structures
- The contribution schemes make to the development of leaving care policy locally.

What are the outcomes of leaving care schemes?

Many different factors may influence a young person's life and there are inevitably methodological problems in assessing outcomes. However outcome studies, particularly the *Moving On* and WESTAT research in the UK and USA respectively, have been conducted using quasi-experimental designs and these offer important findings.

The *Moving On* research found that specialist schemes worked particularly well in relation to accommodation and life skills and to some extent in furthering social networks, developing relationships and building self esteem. Three quarters of young people were helped. However the schemes had little impact on educational outcomes; here the crucial factor was placement stability and the young person having an environment which encouraged studying. The WESTAT study showed the effectiveness of targeted and cumulative independent living programmes. A consistent finding was that schemes and specialist programmes need to be built on a foundation of stability, continuity and family links if they are to help young people the most.

What works in practice?

When schemes work well why is this so?

Preparing young people for leaving care

Evaluation of good practice points to the importance of:

- assessment (ie identifying the young person's needs and how they will be met);
- support and participation (involving discussion and negotiation and risk-taking in the context of a stable placement);
- the gradual opportunity to learn skills.

Accommodation

A number of models are discussed, including supported lodgings, staying on in care, hostels and flats with support, independent tenancies and foyers. The following features assist positive outcomes:

- Involving young people in planning and decision making
- Assessing needs and preparing young people
- Offering a choice in the type and location of accommodation
- Not moving young people in an unplanned way, before they are ready
- Having a contingency plan in case the accommodation breaks down
- Setting up a package of support
- Having a clear financial plan
- Providing information relevant to the type of accommodation

Personal and financial support

Evaluation suggests that support should be:

- planned and negotiated with young people
- proactive – not just responding to a crisis
- flexible, given the variety of needs of young people
- designed to address practical, financial and emotional needs

Education, employment and training

These aspects of care leavers' lives are under-researched but some messages are clear:

- Stability in care and the support and encouragement of carers is important for achieving educational success
- Local authority social workers tend to have low expectations of children in the care system; foster carers on the other hand are generally more aware of the importance of education
- Education and employment prospects after the age of 16 can be improved by a) assessing carefully each young person's capabilities, and b) working with them to increase their employability before they take on the demands of education, training and employment.

Overall the most successful schemes have the following features:

- They target the core needs of care leavers – for accommodation, social support, finance and careers – in different ways. This includes providing information, counselling, group work support, and drop in facilities.
- They work with young people, not for them, and involve them in decisions that are important to them.
- They work with other agencies – particularly housing providers, benefits, employment and training agencies
- They influence policy locally – by increasing awareness of issues, contributing to debates and informing policy responses
- They have clear objectives, good management and well developed policies on access to schemes, equal opportunities, service delivery and scheme monitoring.

Some implications for policy and practice

The Children Act 1989 provides the legislative framework for leaving care services. However the range and quality of what is offered varies across the country. The introduction of national standards as has been proposed by First Key (the National Leaving Care Advisory Group) would help address this.

Some aspects of the Act need reviewing, such as the discretionary provisions for 'assistance in cash' under section 24. There are arguments for considering whether after care services should be extended and provided up to the age of 25.

The present arrangements for financial support need review. For example the 8 week period of entitlement to benefit after leaving school is too short for many 16 and 17 year old care leavers. Some are left destitute before they receive Severe Hardship Payments. Some features of the Job Seekers Allowance may also disadvantage care leavers.

Supported accommodation projects and other forms of housing make a key contribution to the wellbeing of care leavers. Developments in housing and social security policy should preserve the role that such projects play.

Any changes in housing benefit policy for 'looked after' young people should not further disadvantage this group.

A key policy and practice issue is the relationship between specialist leaving care services and 'prime' foster and residential carers. For many young people the best approach would be for their prime carers to be responsible for preparing them for adulthood, with the specialist leaving care team offering resources rather than intensive substitute support.

A well resourced and implemented childcare strategy is needed which can offer stable and high quality care to all young people needing it.

What else do we need to know?

Early studies in this field were usually small exploratory client opinion and non experimental studies. They gave useful insight into the lives of young people leaving care but they were limited in size, scope and design. Later studies have built in comparisons with the general population and have been more rigorously designed but there are still gaps in our knowledge. For example we need:

- more outcome studies, including designs using randomised control trials
- more studies which use comparison samples of non care leavers
- more studies of specific groups – particularly black and mixed heritage young people, young parents and young people with special needs
- more theoretical work drawing on an empirical base.

Conclusion

What Works in Leaving Care? argues that belief and commitment alone cannot build the services which young people leaving care need. Despite gaps in our knowledge there are now some strong messages about the best ways of helping care leavers through this difficult stage of their lives. To be effective, schemes need to involve young people in planning, create links with other agencies and have clear objectives.

They need to be flexible and build on young people's strengths. Above all, placement stability, continuity and family links are essential. Young people who feel supported and encouraged by family members or former foster carers are more likely than others to be able to cope with the major changes facing them.

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