

Promoting the resilience and well-being of young people leaving care: messages from research¹

Mike Stein, November 2009

For most young people today, moving in to their own accommodation, entering further or higher education, finding satisfying employment, and achieving good health and a positive sense of well-being, represent important landmarks during their journey to adulthood. These pathways are also closely connected and often reinforcing. There is evidence that, as a group, care leavers are more disadvantaged and face more difficulties than other young people in achieving these landmarks. Research studies also show that there are differences between groups of care leavers – some care leavers do very well, against the odds. The application of a resilience framework suggests there are messages from research for promoting the well-being of care leavers, whilst living in care, at the time of leaving care, and after they leave care.

Young people's lives in care

Studies show that the quality of placements is central to the well-being of children and young people. This suggests an 'authoritative' parenting style (underpinning the parenting capacity domain of the assessment framework) that provides: compensatory attachments, or stability and continuity; a positive experience of education; prioritises health and well-being; turning points, new opportunities; and provides preparation in self-care, practical and inter-personal skills. Research suggests some young people with social, emotional and behavioural problems may require more treatment based approaches in care.

Young people transitions from care

Many care leavers have to cope with major changes in their lives, in leaving foster care or residential care and setting-up home, in leaving school and entering the world of work, or post-16 education or training, or being parents, at a far younger age than other young people. Many have compressed and accelerated transitions to adulthood. This represents a barrier to promoting their well-being in that they are denied the psychological opportunity to deal with issues over time which is how most young people cope with the challenges of transition. There is evidence that both physical and mental health problems increase at the time of transition and may combine with earlier pre-care and in-care difficulties, or new challenges during transition, which affects their overall health and well-being.

Young people's lives after they leave care

Research shows how health and well-being is closely connected to other dimensions of young people's lives including education, careers, accommodation, life skills and social support. There is evidence that young people can be assisted in these areas by different forms of support including leaving care services, mentoring, support by former carers and positive family and kinship networks. Recent research exploring the health and well-being outcomes of young people leaving care identified a group with 'positive well-being', and a highly vulnerable group of young people with a broad range of emotional, behavioural and mental health difficulties, suggesting the importance of personalised responses.

Summary points

Promoting the well-being of care leavers will require comprehensive responses across their life-course including: pre-care interventions – the risk factors for entry to

care correspond with the aetiology of mental health problems; ensuring high quality care to compensate young people, including the identification and treatment of mental health problems; more gradual transitions from care, more akin to normative transitions, and, providing inter-connected and personalised support into adulthood, not just at the time of leaving care.

ⁱ For indicative articles and references informing this paper see: Stein (2008), Resilience and Young People Leaving Care, *Child Care in Practice*, 14, (1), 35-44; Dixon (2008) Young people leaving care: health, well-being and outcomes, *Child and Family Social Work*, 13,2 207-217; Stein (2009) *Quality Matters in Children's Services, messages from research*, JKP