

Lifting the aspirations of young people transitioning from out of home care by Philip Mendes

Only about 2400 young people nationally and less than 600 young people in Victoria aged 15-17 years leave care each year. Some do very well and have achieved prominence in sporting, political and public life. But too many are reliant on Australia's income security, health and welfare, homeless, criminal justice and other crisis intervention systems.

The reasons for their disadvantage are very simple. Firstly, many have experienced and are still recovering from considerable abuse or neglect prior to entering care. Secondly, many young people have experienced inadequacies in state care including poor quality caregivers, and constant shifts of placement, carers, schools and workers. Thirdly, many care leavers can call on little, if any, direct family support or other community networks to ease their involvement into independent living.

In addition to these major disadvantages, many young people currently experience an abrupt end at 16-18 years of age to the formal support networks of state care. That is, the state as corporate parent fails to provide the ongoing financial, social and emotional support and nurturing offered by most families of origin.

The pathway for achieving better outcomes is also well known. The international research argues that three key reforms are required to improve outcomes for care leavers: improving the quality of care, a more gradual and flexible transition from care, and more specialized after-care supports.

The **first** necessary reform is improving the quality of care as positive in-care experiences involving a secure attachment with a supportive carer are essential in order to overcome damaging pre-care experiences of abuse or neglect. This involves providing stability and continuity, an opportunity if at all possible to maintain positive family links which contribute to a positive sense of identity, and assistance to overcome educational deficits and holistic preparation. Foster care placements, small children's homes and residential care with a therapeutic orientation appear to be most successful in addressing young people's emotional and educational needs.

The **second** component is the transition from care which includes both preparation for leaving care, and the actual moving out from the placement

into transitional or half-way supportive arrangements from approximately 16-21 years. This transition needs to be less accelerated, and instead become a gradual and flexible process based on levels of maturity and skill development, rather than simply age. Care leavers cannot reasonably be expected without family assistance to attain instant adulthood. It is not possible for them to successfully attain independent housing, leave school, move into further education, training or employment, and in some cases become a parent, all at the same time. Rather these tasks need to be undertaken sequentially. As reflected in the ‘focal model of adolescence’, they need to be given the same psychological opportunity and space as all young people to progressively explore a range of interpersonal and identity issues well into their twenties.

An effective leaving care model would arguably include:

- Allocated worker or adviser for each young person as per the United Kingdom model;
- No discharge at 18 years or under unless mature enough to live independently
- Preventive programs to stop exit into youth or adult justice system, and ongoing support for young people on juvenile justice orders, or in custody. UK legislation requires that suitable accommodation be made available on release from prison;
- All care leavers must be offered stable and secure housing: no exit into homelessness. The UK is currently trialling “Staying Put” schemes which permit care leavers to remain with foster parents beyond 18 years of age;
- Support for physical and mental health needs including ongoing therapeutic support if necessary to overcome experiences of abuse and trauma;
- Holistic support for substance abuse issues;
- Assistance to achieve positive educational outcomes including a generous bursary for higher education. The UK offers a minimum of two thousand pounds per year;
- Assistance via opportunities for training and work experience to achieve positive career/employment outcomes;
- Assistance with social supports and renegotiating family and other relationships via mentoring etc: all care leavers should have at least one supportive adult involved in their life;
- Specialised programs of support for young parents;

- Additional assistance for indigenous care leavers to address cultural and identity issues;
- Additional support for disabled young people;
- Ongoing support for unaccompanied asylum seekers.
- and financial assistance to access appropriate furniture and household items and pay advance rent and bond if necessary.

The **third** component is ongoing support after care till approximately 25 years of age. This may involve a continuation of existing care and supports and/or specialist leaving care services in areas such as accommodation, finance, education and employment, health and social networks. This ongoing support reflects messages from life course theory which emphasize that transitions to independence vary according to the diversity of life experiences, and that care leavers should not be expected to conform to normative ideals of maturation and timing. The research evidence suggests that effective after-care interventions can facilitate ‘turning points’ that enable young people to overcome the adverse emotional impact of earlier traumatic experiences.

Victoria has made some progress in recent years as reflected in the introduction of the *Children, Youth and Families Act 2005* which obliges the state to assist care leavers up to 21 years of age. The government has established mentoring, post care support and flexible funding support for young people transitioning from care or post care in all eight regions, but more still needs to be done.

Care authorities should aim to approximate the ongoing and holistic support that responsible parents in the community typically provide to their children after they leave home till at least 25 years. Providing adequate supports for care leavers in Australia is relatively cheap given the small number of care leavers in any one year, and will provide substantial social and economic gains for both the young people concerned and Australian society more generally.

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See some other recent publications below:

“Improving outcomes for teenage pregnancy and early parenthood for young people in out-of-home care: a review of the literature” in White, Rob(ed.) Youth Work and Social Diversity. ACYS Publishing. Hobart, 2010, pp.115-130.

(With Badal Moslehuddin) “Abuse and neglect in care: then and now” in Hil, Richard & Branigan, Elizabeth (eds) Surviving Care: Achieving Justice and Healing for the Forgotten Australians. Bond University Press, Robina, 2010, pp.217-229.

“Towards a Community Development Support model for young people transitioning from state out-of-home care: a case study of St Luke’s Anglicare in Victoria, Australia”, Practice, Vol.23,No.2, 2011, pp 69-81.

(With Larissa Barrie) “The experiences of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children in and leaving the out of home care system in the UK and Australia”, International Social Work, In Press, 2011.

“Moving from dependence to independence: a study of the experiences of 18 care leavers in a leaving care and after care support service in Victoria”, Children Australia, Volume 35, No.1, 2010, pp.14-21.

“Young people transitioning from out-of-home care: A critical analysis of Australian and international policy and practice”, Australian Social Work, Volume 62, No.3, 2009, pp.389-403.

“Mentoring for care leavers” in Developing Practice, Number 23, 2009, pp.36-44.

(With Badal Moslehuddin) “Transitioning from state care to state prison: a critical analysis of the relationship between leaving out of home care and involvement in the criminal justice system”, Social Alternatives, Volume 28, No.3, 2009, pp.51-56.

“Young people transitioning from out-of-home care: Jumping hoops to access employment”
in Family Matters, No.83, pp 32-38, 2009.

(with Judy Cashmore) “Australia” in Mike Stein and Emily Munro (eds.) *Young People’s Transitions from care to Adulthood: International Research and Practice*. Jessica Kingsley, London, 2008, pp.23-35.