



Young people with disability

By Robyn Edwards

The transition from adolescence to adulthood takes several years and may involve a number of setbacks for any young person. For some young people, leaving statutory out of home care once they turn 18 can mean a sudden move from childhood to independence and adulthood, with little community support. The Wood Inquiry into Child Protection (2008) found that young people leaving care are one of the most disadvantaged and vulnerable groups in society, but do not always receive the support they need to settle their lives and find accommodation and employment. Problems may be compounded for young people with disability; however little is known about the experiences of this group while they are in, and when they leave, care.

The NSW Leaving Care Program is one initiative which provides person-centred support to young people with disability leaving care. It offers transition planning, case management, access to support, accommodation, vocational opportunities and skills development, a mentoring service and community participation. NSW Ageing, Disability and Home Care (ADHC) commissioned the SPRC to conduct a program evaluation which includes a literature review, survey of young participants, and case studies. This article discusses highlights from the literature review.

Three major difficulties faced by young people leaving care have been identified in the literature:

First, many care leavers have experienced and are still recovering from physical, sexual or emotional abuse or neglect prior to entering care.

Second, many have experienced inadequacies in state care including

poor quality caregivers, and constant shifts of placement, carers, schools and caseworkers.

Third, many care leavers can call on little, if any, family support or community networks to transition to independent living.

Many young people experience problems after leaving care including drug and alcohol abuse, violence, homelessness, poor support networks and unresolved family issues and anger. However, care leavers are not a homogenous group, and some do well after leaving care; in particular young people who had stable placements while in care, had completed their secondary schooling and were able to maintain some continuity in relationships and living arrangements.

Safe, secure and stable accommodation is critical for young people who do not remain with their foster family nor return to birth parents. A study by Johnson et al. (2009) confirms that providing care leavers with stable housing is associated with better outcomes; conversely placing young people in insecure housing when they leave care can kick-start their homeless career.

Young people leaving care need support with relationships, education, housing, employment, life skills, identity, and financial support. Furthermore, they need to be involved in decisions and participate in the transition, with support provided to facilitate their communication and involvement. While government reports often focus on education and employment as helping care leavers, young people spoke about the need for friendship, relationships and identity.

Disability is invisible

Disability receives scant attention to the point of invisibility in much of the extensive literature on child protection. This is despite some suggestions that the prevalence of children and young people with disability in care is high. In the UK government estimates indicate around one quarter of all care leavers may have a disability.

The UK National Working Group on Child Protection and Disability (2003) documents the silence about disability in the child protection field. It shows that, despite the vulnerability of children with disability to abuse and neglect, very little is known about the experiences of disabled children within the child protection system.

It is important to listen to the voices and experiences of young people themselves. This is reflected in the SPRC evaluation which has aimed to be inclusive of young people with disability and listen to their experiences of leaving care and the support they need to move towards adulthood.

References

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