

Findings from focus groups on the importance and impact of relationships between children and young people in care and their carers and lead professionals

Introduction

The analysis of the data collected from our peer research study¹ indicated that encouragement and other aspects of young people's relationships with staff and carers, and the support they received from them, were key factors in 'having made things better with regards to ETE' and in 'what made the difference' overall during their time in care.

We wanted to further explore the possible links between feeling cared for and better outcomes for care leavers, so a focus group was organised in two local authorities in the Midlands - a metropolitan and a county council in England. The focus groups were made entirely of care leavers, ranging from ages 16 to 24. In one group there were 9 young people of whom 3 had left care, and in the other group there were 6 participants, who had all left care.

In these groups we asked the following questions:

1. In the questionnaire, young people were asked if they felt cared for by their local authority. What made you feel cared for? What was most important?
2. How important is having a good relationship with your carer, social worker and leaving care worker, compared with other things about being in care?
3. Do you think that having someone you had a good relationship with, who made you feel cared for, affected what happened to you in care, for example, did having someone like that affect the amount of support you were given or how many placements you had, or whether or not you did well in school or got work or training? In what way?

Findings

In relation to feeling cared for by the local authority the young people in one group did not feel cared for at all. One young person said that social services "just dump you in a flat, give you money every week and that was it." When asked what could have been done to make them feel cared for, the young person responded "Give us a choice of what social worker we wanted. Help us a bit more when we were leaving care and (sic) when we're independent instead of just leaving us, stuff like that."

Young people expressed how crucial communication is to developing a good relationship with their workers and carers. One young person stated that in order for them to feel cared for, the local authority should "explain what they are going to do, instead of just saying you're moving today, you haven't got a choice. This is where you're going home. Something. They don't even talk to the young person about it."

When discussing the importance of relationships with carers and staff, all the young people stated how important it was to have good relationships.

One young person clearly stated the benefits of having a good relationship with at least one trusted adult:

"If you have a crap time in foster care but you have a good PA it makes things a little better. They can support you with what you want to do. If you have a familiar face you get comfort and someone you can turn to. In relation to housing it is better to have a relationship with your foster carer as they will always be there for you. If you gave a good relationship with your foster carer then you can become family."

It was interesting to note the difference in attitude when moving on from talking about the Local Authority to carers and staff. Some young people seemed to view the local authority as a corporate body as uncaring, but gave examples of having supportive relationships with individual adults, i.e. carers, social

¹ What Makes the Difference? Peer Research Study: conducted by care leavers on the views of care leavers in England, 2007. WMTD/Rainer/NCB. Report available at www.leavingcare.org/professionals/products/peer_research

workers and personal advisors (i.e. the people who actually do the 'parenting' on a day to day basis).

Young people were asked whether feeling cared for and having good relationships affected what happened to them in care. The majority cited specific examples of how having good relationships with carers had made a positive difference or where it could have made a difference.

"I wouldn't be who I am now if it wasn't for my foster mum, she is my world"

"I used to skive school a lot but she (carer) encouraged me to stop and to get the grades I needed. She helped me through everything...she deserves a medal."

"My foster carer made me feel welcome...the care provided by my carers set the foundations for me to succeed when I moved into independence."

"If I'd had a good relationship I would have tried hard to be better at school."

"If I'd had a good relationship I wouldn't have been a little shit. If I was treated like shit then I acted like shit. If people give you respect then you will give them respect."

The importance of having good relationships with lead professionals was also emphasised:

"I know every right or wrong decision I make, my social worker is by my side. Always there. She listens to my opinions. She goes out of her way a lot. I am going to college in January thanks to my social worker; she dragged me up to college."

Young people also showed a degree of maturity when reflecting upon their experiences and the impact good relationships can have:

"If you have a good relationship with your carer it affects the way you behave"
'Good relationships affect what happens to you.'

But someone also reflected the role they have to play as individuals:

"It is important to a certain point (the relationships with carers)- they do as much as they can but you have to take stuff on board."

Although young people gave positive examples of how having good relationships have impacted positively on their lives, some also told of difficult experiences with carers and workers and how damaging this can be. They also highlighted the barriers which prevented them and other young people from building and sustaining relationships which could ultimately stop them from feeling cared for:

"One problem is that you build a good relationship with your family and they (LA) pull you out and they do it again and again and again. They rip your life apart again."

"You should have one carer, you pack, settle, repack, move. You could just give up."

Conclusions

The focus groups clearly reflected the impact that good relationships can have and how important they are. Unfortunately, although this is something many may take for granted, it is not straight forward for young people in care, since the system does not always provide the stability and therefore the time required to build secure relationships with caring and trusted adults. One young person eloquently stated what was required:

"Talk to us instead of making choices for us"

Listening to young people and involving them in the decision making process could prevent needless moves, which are such a barrier to building good relationships and ultimately feeling cared for. But what could not be denied was the positive impact good relationships and feeling cared for had for the young people who participated in these focus groups.