



What Makes The Difference? Project

Key Messages

1. The importance of feeling cared for

“I always felt like number. Always.”

If any child is to succeed to the best of their ability they must feel cared for. Children in care and care leavers are no different – they have a ‘gap’ in their parenting that needs to be filled. The size of this gap depends on each child’s resilience and ability and the positive involvement of their natural family. To ‘make the difference’ to their emotional wellbeing and to improve outcomes, corporate parents have to develop services that fill each child’s ‘parenting gap’.

“My experience of being parented in the care system was pretty harsh. I felt like I was just a lodger in someone’s house. There wasn’t enough care there.”

Too often there is a conflict between local authorities in providing universal children’s services and the services they provide their children and young people in care. Corporate parents have to show their children that they are special – that they are the priority – if they are to make the difference and improve outcomes.

“There’s a huge network of people and you’re just confused. You don’t know who’s who.”

Lead professionals and carers, alongside local authorities, must work hard to personalise the care they provide, just as good parents would. Children and young people must feel included and given a positive sense of identity and the emotional support they need. If they are to feel cared for they must be listened to and be given clear and reasonable boundaries as well as encouragement and praise. This is the basis of their future emotional wellbeing.

“I used to love just sitting at a dinner table, or even if I was just sat on the settee, and everyone eating their dinner together. And that was like a heart warming feeling really. Like have little family nights that we used to have.”

2. Relationships count

Behind most successful young people there is someone who ‘goes the extra mile’ and has ‘made the difference’ – it could be the ‘pushy carer/worker’ who provides care the young person needs, often ‘in spite of’ the system. Young people need to be allowed to form attachments and develop good relationships to succeed. The real challenge for corporate parents is to understand what this looks like and to develop services can provide these bonds.

“I’m really glad that the PA came looking for me because if she didn’t I wouldn’t have got the support. She supported me a lot in so many things, it was just unbelievable.”

Good parents know their children – who they are, and listen to what they need and want. They don’t make assumptions. Good corporate parents need to do the same. At local and national levels services could be improved by really listening to what young people are saying and working with them to provide it.

“I used to play football every Saturday and the match on Sunday. And when it was raining loads, my foster Dad would still stand there with about five jackets on and a scarf and watch me. He didn’t have to, he didn’t even like football.”

Corporate parenting is not just about Lead Members and Children’s Services Directors. As important – more important to young people – are the lead professionals/carers involved in their day-to-day lives. They are the people who are the front line in providing care and can truly make a difference. Current systems all too often do not empower these people to do their jobs as they should. At best, providing ‘front line’ corporate parenting/care isn’t easy; at worst, there is a real conflict of interest for local authorities in empowering workers/carers in their roles.

Care, for any child or young person with additional needs, must be based upon strong, safe and supportive relationships with parents and the right level of therapeutic input to support that care. It is the link between these two elements that can make the difference, helping them to overcome their difficulties. Corporate care must be no different.

“I’ve got my job, I’m not even in foster care any more, but they’ll take me to work in the morning and have my tea ready for me when I get home. It’s just those little things that add up and make me think this is what a family is like. This is my family.”

3. Good parents take risks

“I don’t think I ever got a cuddle, that’s because there could be accusations.”

Social care has become risk averse. Corporate parents have to manage risk far better than at present and governments have to support them to do so.

“I think if social services, in my case, obviously, not all cases, let the foster family go on without as many interruptions, then the whole thing would have run smoother.”

Excessive bureaucracy and administration, especially for lead professionals and carers, does not personalise services and can undermine success. In social care record keeping is important and professionalism is essential, but it is crucial to follow as normal a process of parenting as possible if we are to make the difference.

“Why don’t you forget the paperwork, come and spend some quality time? Make us feel happy; make us feel wanted. Make us feel needed. That’s what we need. And we didn’t get that.”

4. Good parents empower their children in family life: corporate parents have to learn to do the same

Successful children are amazingly knowledgeable and feel secure in what their families provide and do together. No good parent would provide care without full discussion and involvement of their children. This provides the secure basis of their emotional wellbeing. These children know what is normal and acceptable in their families; whether it's what time they need to be home or what pocket money they will receive, for example. Too many children in care don't have these boundaries and this increases their confusion and insecurity.

Children in care and care leavers need what they have asked for during numerous consultations: local, personalised pledges that set out the detail of their care in an open, honest and accountable way.

WMTD identified positive outcomes when young people were involved in shaping services and local authorities achieved greater access to young people's views through initiatives such as young people's groups and a young people's page, including blog pages, on the authority's website.

"If someone wants a say, listen to them – don't just ignore them."

Service User Involvement (SUI) posts increase the involvement of young people in the service and as a result, young people feel their views are being acted on. One group established by the SUI worker was consulted about Care Matters and successfully gained funding to improve facilities in their centre.

"[having a SUI plan] has lead to better team planning, clearer questions when interviewing staff, better service developments and a more responsive service in line with what young people want." (Service Manager)

Peer support and mentoring schemes benefit those receiving service, helping them to deal with practical challenges, provide emotional support, improve self-esteem and confidence, and increasing skills and participation levels. These schemes help young people feel they are being heard and that their opinions have an impact. Staff respondents reported 'lasting changes' in the care leaving service as a result of the peer mentoring scheme.

"It is good to have someone to talk to because he/she has been through the same thing."

5. Additional support in education and training for children in care and care leavers does make a positive difference to outcomes

Individual tuition and support and life-skills training make a positive difference. But for it to succeed, particularly for young people not in education, training or employment (NEET), the support must be provided in a way that they need, want and can understand. The most successful integrated service provision for children in care and care leavers will be that which includes personalised support.

The individual tuition project report from Middlesbrough LA indicated that out of 17 young people who sat formal examinations, 11 of them (65%) exceeded predicted grades; some of them far exceeding them. There were other positive outcomes too in terms of increased attendance, reduced exclusions and greater confidence and self-esteem. One leaving care PA reported:

“[Individual tuition provided] invaluable support without which I feel this individual would have been excluded permanently. Now has a genuine chance of achieving GCSEs at good grades.”

Another senior manager said:

“I think it’s just some young people feeling better about themselves ... that’s a huge gain, feeling valued. That’s bigger than any performance indicator, isn’t it?”

Good parents see every activity as a learning opportunity for their child: they use every opportunity they have to help their child to grow and succeed. Corporate parents must do the same. The extended ‘corporate family’ for children in care and care leavers has great untapped potential that could help improve outcomes.

The knowledge base of most social care professionals regarding education, training and employment is inadequate. These professionals should understand the world of education, training and employment at least as well as any good parent would. Dedicated education training and employment (ETE) workers make a difference. There also needs to be more joint working between education and social care professionals. One staff member said:

“School and social services have worked very well together to improve the education and life chances of this young person”

Lead professionals and carers must be empowered to act as ‘pushy parents’ for children in care and care leavers in their education and training. More importantly local authorities must allow them to be ‘pushy’. To make a difference, central government must empower lead professionals.

6. Planning and preparation for adult life must start early, but ...

Exactly when this process starts depends upon the age, ability and vulnerability of the young person. It must not be process driven nor solely focussed on making young people leave care at 16 or 17 years old. The fear and anxiety implicit within the current system undermines young people’s ability and opportunity for success.

“The biggest issue for me was the loneliness, you’re suddenly on your own, the whole concept is a bit mad”

“You need to live your childhood rather than become an adult before you should. So doing the basic stuff, doing your own washing, is something you might do at home, but why should a child have to grow up before they should?”

For all young people learning about adult life must be experiential – with parents fully involving young people in testing out their skills as they move towards independence. It must be well planned, as safe as possible and at a pace that young people can cope with. Most importantly there must be a ‘safety net’. Children in care and care leavers should expect no less.

“I wasn’t prepared in any way for independent living. I knew there was so much I couldn’t do – I knew I had to experience stuff and learn from it.”

7. Too few corporate parents properly consider the employability of young people in and from care

Corporate parents are often the most able to provide children in care and care leavers with enormous opportunities for learning within their own and other local organisations. If we are to do the best for them we must exploit every opportunity we have.

A significant amount of young people who for various reasons are unlikely, unable or unwilling to achieve within formal education settings want more hands-on, practical learning opportunities such as work experience, traineeships/apprenticeships and employment.

WMTD findings clearly indicated that young people's low self-confidence was a significant barrier to them obtaining and sustaining employment: they did not believe in themselves and often had no understanding of how to behave in the workplace. Some young people were not felt to be ready to engage with work, given that their housing circumstances were unsettled and they were experiencing other disruptions in their personal lives. Often they were reported to have a short-term aim to 'get any job', rather than harbouring long-term career aspirations. Local authorities need to take more responsibility as corporate parents to get young people 'work ready' in a supportive environment by providing suitable and interesting work experience and employment opportunities within their departments/services.

"Getting a job will change my life. All I wanted to do is get a job"

"I think [the work placement] gave me a bit more confidence to think, 'I can go out and I can do this now'."

However, if a work placement was an isolated event, without any chance of accreditation or a clear progression plan, then young people were less likely to engage. The placements need to be attractive and interesting to young people, which was not always the case.

"Employers see you as a trouble maker"

"People look at me different when I tell them I live in care, they don't give me a job"

Employers supporting the WMTD partnership work also suggest that more preparation or training be provided for employers, so that they were better prepared for some of the specific challenges that young care leavers might present.

NCB reported that 100% of NEET and 82% of ETE young people who returned questionnaires felt that the employment-related support had 'made a difference' to them. When asked to explain, a wide range of responses were forthcoming, covering changes in motivation, awareness, confidence, skills, aspirations as well as more tangible outcomes, such as getting a job.

"Because it has made me realise what work I am interested in and what I am not."

"Made me be able to cope with things myself"

"It has helped me want to make something of my life and get into work or training."

8. Skills and training for professionals and carers

Care professionals need to have skills and knowledge in child development and parenting. This will help them recognise and fulfil their role as good corporate parents to children in care and care leavers and does make the difference.

“... sometimes carers do separate shopping, or like the shopping for the young person on this day and shopping for ‘my’ kids on this day. Things like that really used to hurt me because you know you’re being singled out and what parent does that?”

“I don’t know if it was a social worker that was meant to come round and do some meetings, but on one occasion I had no contact with the social worker so I was in someone’s house for like eight months with no planning and no nothing.”

“... living with same family for ten years and building a fantastic relationship with them and their family.”



Rainer

Equal

