

IT'S NOT A TRANSITION PLAN IF THE YOUNG PERSON WASN'T INVOLVED

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CREATE Foundation has actively advocated for improvements in the supports and services available to young people leaving statutory care and transitioning to adult life since 2007. Legislation and government policy in all Australian jurisdictions emphasises the importance of transition from care planning and support. Typically, legislation provides that transition planning should commence from at least 15 years of age and that assistance should be provided to young people until they turn either 21 or 25.

This opinion piece focuses on the importance of encouraging and facilitating the participation of young people in planning their transition from care. It is important that child protection systems allocate sufficient resources so that young people have the opportunity to work with their caseworker, carers and other relevant service providers to document their vision and goals for their future and to jointly develop a realistic and achievable plan for realising short to medium term goals.

Unfortunately, many young people are unaware that they may have a transition plan. The reality is that many transition plans exist on paper only. Many young Australians who are in the care of the state have a transition plan recorded on their file that they have had little, or no, involvement in preparing. It is well documented that transition planning can help to minimise the risk of young

people experiencing adverse outcomes in later life. Is the benefit of a transition plan realised through the development of a document or through participation in the planning process?

Exiting care at age 18

Transitioning from out-of-home care to adult life is a change process involving a number of phased or staged series of events (transition points). The most obvious transition point is that a young person reaches the age of majority where the legal landscape alters dramatically and she/he assumes adult legal rights and obligations. Nobody has a choice about whether they will legally become an adult. Most young people rely on the support of adults with whom they have a stable relationship to help them through this change.

Many young people in care do not have a choice as to whether or not they can stay in their current care situation and many do not have any stable relationships with adults that will persist after they turn 18 that they can draw support from (Cashmore & Paxman, 2006; Schofield, 2001). Schofield (2001) suggests that prioritising continuity of relationships from childhood to adulthood is a key protective factor and helps to build skills for independence. For young people who do not have continuing caring relationships, participation in transition planning before they turn 18 is all the more crucial to ensure that they are ready to assume

adult roles and responsibilities and continue to have access to people and organisations who can provide advice and support.

Where to go and what to do

There is no doubt that the private housing market is competitive and since the housing boom, accessing rental properties is expensive with some houses costing per week the amount that Centrelink allowances pay per fortnight. Without references, stable employment and/or assistance from experienced adults, accessing private sector housing is tricky. Too many young people leave statutory care only to find themselves in homeless shelters, refuges, living on friends sofas or taking risks and living in more tenuous situations (McDowall, 2009; Natalier & Johnson, 2012). Research suggests that approximately 35 per cent to 50 per cent of young people will at some stage experience homelessness after their state care experience (See Dworsky, 2010; Forbes et al., 2006; McDowall, 2009; Pecora et al., 2003). A recent report suggests that approximately 30 per cent of young people leaving care will find themselves living in prison at some point in their life (Indig et al., 2010).

In 2009, 32.2 per cent of female prisoners and 22.9 per cent of male prisoners in NSW had been in state care (Indig et al., 2010a). Approximately 45 per cent of Aboriginal inmates (women and men) in NSW had a care background (Indig et al., 2010a). Krinsky (2010) referred to the child protection system (in the USA) as a feeder for gangs and criminal activity. This is a confronting comment that carries a hefty punch. However, considering the statistics published about the NSW prison population, Krinsky's comments

appear to reflect the Australian, or at the very least the NSW, experience (See Indig et al., 2010b).

To reduce the incidence of homelessness and imprisonment among young people leaving care, carers, caseworkers and other key stakeholders need to ensure young people are supported to plan for their future accommodation needs and to acquire the knowledge, skills and abilities they will need in adult life before they leave their care placement. However, as Schofield (2001) suggests, placements that build internal sources of resilience that lead to caring familial relationships is also a key protective factor. These relationships need to be developed within the care placement and can be with carers, caseworkers or another significant adult.

In terms of ensuring a young person is less likely to enter homelessness, unemployment and other adverse situations, workers must engage young people in the transition planning process and ensure that appropriate access is given to services and supports. This may include helping young people acquire independent living skills, social skills and to access therapeutic, behaviour, housing and other relevant supports and services. It is also important that young people are assisted to plan for economic independence through work readiness support and assistance to access income support such as Centrelink benefits, the Commonwealth Transition to Independent Living Allowance and the CREATE Your Future Grants Scheme.

Leaving care without participating in a plan

A leaving care plan is the written

outcome of the process through which workers, carers and other key stakeholders assist young people in care to consider what services and support she/he will need in order to prepare for adult life. This is not a tick the box process. Every transition plan should be specific to the needs of the individual. However, it is important that the planning process considers matters such as further education, work readiness, employment, medical assistance, housing, social skills and independent living skills.

It is important that plans are documented by caseworkers wherever possible and that a copy is provided to each young person and the key stakeholders who are involved in the transition process. The primary purpose of a transition plan is to assist the young person navigate early adulthood and as such should be in a format appropriate for each young person. Documented plans allow for progress towards achieving goals to be recorded and help to coordinate consistent services across providers.

Written plans also serve as a reminder for young people and workers about the importance of being well prepared for adult life. It is important to remember that many young people leaving care do not have the benefit of stable relationships with adults who can guide them through the transition process. As Cashmore and Paxman (2006) point out, those who leave care at age 18 usually do so because they have been unable to return to their pre-placement family home. Therefore, their support base is likely to be lacking.

Kiraly (2011) points out the inappropriateness of some young people in kinship care being asked to prepare a leaving care plan. She points

out that most 14 to 18 year olds would not be discussing leaving home at that age. The most probable scenario is a conversation about their future aspirations and how they might be pursued through tertiary or vocational training (Kiraly, 2011). However, it can be argued that a conversation about future aspirations is a starting point for transitioning planning rather than an end point. Kiraly's view highlights the importance of distinguishing between transition planning as a document and transition planning as a process. Every young person in care will have different needs, aspirations and goals. For some young people it may be clear that they do not require a detailed accommodation plan because staying in their current arrangement is a realistic option that they want to pursue. Therefore, they would be central to the process of planning what they want to do and they could be guided in how best to get there.

The 2011 CREATE Report Card found that approximately 32 per cent of the 605 young people aged 15 to 17 who participated in the research were aware that they had some form of leaving care plan (McDowall, 2011). Of this minority, almost two thirds suggested they had been heavily involved in developing their plans and 70 per cent indicated that they thought their plan would be quite useful. This data suggests that the carers, caseworkers and other interested people who worked with these individuals took the time to discuss their post care options, risks and opportunities and that this work was documented and communicated to young people.

It is more likely that young people who have been actively engaged in the development and implementation of a transition plan will find the process to be

meaningful, of value and an activity for which they can feel some degree of ownership over. Therefore, it is likely that the young people who experience the transition process in this participative way are more likely to use their transition plan and be less likely to experience adverse factors in early adulthood.

Meaningful engagement and participation

When people are engaged in a decision making process they assume greater individual responsibility for the outcomes and the ongoing process. However, tokenistic involvement in a process can have the opposite effect. It is vital that young people's engagement in transition planning processes is meaningful to them. Their participation must be sincerely sought, encouraged and facilitated. It is important that young people are able to lead the process to the extent possible and that their views and opinions guide the process.

Young people should be encouraged to develop and articulate their own vision for their future and then be supported to set goals that assist them to achieve them. Few people would disagree with the principle of supporting young people to participate in key decisions about their life. In fact, child participation is an important human right articulated in the Convention on the Rights of the Child. However, despite widespread support for the principle of child participation in Australian law and policy, the experience of young people who are leaving care is often one where plans are written for them rather than with them (McDowall, 2011). Greenen and Powers (2007) highlighted a 'frustrating paradox' where young people "have little or no opportunity to practice skills of self-determination while in care, but are expected to suddenly be able to control

and direct their own lives once they are emancipated" (Greenen & Powers, 2007, p.1090).

Research conducted in NSW found that 57 per cent of young people reported they had contemplated suicide 12 months after statutory care ended (Cashmore & Paxman, 1996; 2007). Thirty-three percent had acted upon such thoughts and had attempted suicide (Cashmore & Paxman, 1996; 2007). Cashmore and Paxman (2007) also found that within 4-5 years of leaving care, 71 per cent of young people had contemplated, attempted or committed suicide. Attempting to take one's own life is a clear message of feeling alone, estranged and worthless.

Cashmore (2002) suggests that meaningful participation of young people in decisions that affect them positively impacts self-esteem and confidence and that through participation they learn that they can be active agents in their own lives. Jackson (2012) discusses, among other things, the importance of developing a positive relationship with young people in order to facilitate a sense of hope for a better future. Lansdown (2010) suggests that meaningful participation involves altering the status of children from passive recipients to active agents. From this perspective, participation is about power (Checkoway, 2011 ; Lansdown, 2010).

Those who actively participate in the decisions that affect them have or gain personal power. They may learn, among other things, that their adverse experiences in childhood do not have to define them and that their future is partially their creation. Caseworkers and carers are perfectly positioned to help young people develop these

positive attributes by encouraging and facilitating participation in the transition to care, in care and out of care processes.

Conclusion

Too many young people leave child protection services at the age of 18 unprepared for adult life. Empowering young people to actively participate in the decisions that affect them is a powerful and essential tool to assist them to develop the skills and attributes that will better equip them to live healthy and productive adult lives. This is particularly relevant to participation in transition planning processes where the consequences of failing to appropriately engage young people can be a lifetime of adverse experiences and hardship.

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