

Introduction: The Evidence for Extending Care

Extending Out-of-Home Care Support to 21 Throughout Australia

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Background

Globally, the out-of-home care research literature extensively documents the relatively poor outcomes achieved by young people with a care experience, particularly as they strive for independence. In all the major life domains (for example, health, education, employment and finances, relationship formation, family and cultural connection) they experience greater disadvantage than do their counterparts in the general population.¹

It has been widely acknowledged that the requirement to 'leave care' at 18 years creates an unnaturally abrupt transition to adulthood.² At this time when many physiological and social changes are occurring in a young person's life, it is not appropriate to expect that they also should be able to handle a complete physical relocation, leaving the placement they may have been in for years to find somewhere else to live. Current data indicates that 30 per cent of care leavers will experience homelessness at some stage in the first year after this disruption.³ Could emerging adulthood be handled more gradually?

Mark Courtney conducted the seminal work in this field when he presented a natural comparison between outcomes for care leavers from Illinois in the United States (US) that allowed young people to remain in care until age 21, and an adjacent state (Wisconsin) that ended care at 18. The extensive body of work by Courtney and colleagues^{4,5} has consistently demonstrated the benefits that can accrue from that extra three years of support.

Courtney's research has led to changes to federal legislation in the US to provide financial support for states that undertake to provide in-care support until 21. Also, it was influential in leading to the introduction of the 'Staying Put' program in the United Kingdom that now continues to provide direct support for young people who request it, both in home-based and residential care.⁶ It also was influential in underpinning the Home Stretch campaign that recently has been mounted in Australia.

In response to significant advocacy for extending placement support to 21, several Australian states have now

adopted this policy. The Australian Capital Territory was the first to include the provision in legislation; however, its implementation is at the department head's discretion. In 2018, Tasmania introduced the option for young people to remain in a placement to 21; South Australia included the 'option to stay' in a raft of legislative changes following the Nyland Royal Commission, and Victoria and Western Australia recently have recognised the benefits of extended placement support as part of budgetary restructuring following the Covid-19 pandemic.

The issue is that two states and one territory (New South Wales [NSW], Queensland [QLD] and the Northern Territory) have not responded to the overwhelming evidence, and followed the lead of most of the developed world, in providing young people with a care experience, that is, young people for whom they have been responsible as the 'corporate parent', with support that has been shown to give them the best platform from which to transition to adulthood.

What do the young people think about this situation? Recent research shows that remaining with their carer after turning 18 is not anathema to many young people; indeed, over half stay with their carer in the first year of transition.⁷ However, carers have to provide this support without any compensation. With some funding provided by governments, more opportunities can be provided; and more of the half who leave placements may consider staying as an option.

Young Persons' Data

The study discussed here is based on consultations conducted in two of the obdurate states (NSW and QLD) by the CREATE foundation with



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87 young people aged between 15 and 18 years (54 per cent female; 37 per cent Indigenous; 66 per cent in home-based placements; 17 per cent in residential care) in out-of-home care to gain their perspective on being supported in a placement until they reach 21 years of age. Given their level of preparation for independence, 52 per cent of respondents felt quite confident they could access health care when needed and find transport to get around. However, only 31 per cent were confident of finding suitable accommodation, and 21 per cent of managing their money.

When given three options for possible future accommodation, 51 per cent of respondents indicated a high likelihood of remaining with their carer; 12 per cent would value support in a different placement; and 36 per cent were most likely to seek independence. In their open comments about the benefits of remaining with a carer, many young people ($n=38$) mentioned a gradual transition; having the same opportunities as non-care experienced youth ($n=24$); continued emotional support ($n=18$); and better mental health ($n=13$). However, challenges raised by remaining were identified, including issues with privacy ($n=22$); relationship complications ($n=17$); and a general loss of independence ($n=17$).

Young people were clear in their views about how long care should be available. Only 9 per cent felt that support should end at 18 years. In contrast, 46 per cent wanted it to continue until 21. However, the remaining 45 per cent indicated they could benefit from help up to 25 and beyond.

Based on the guidelines expressed in the *National Standards for Out-of-Home Care*, leaving-care planning should begin at no later than age 15. When asked where they planned to live after aging out of care at 18, 23 per cent of this sample were unsure what they were going to do. Of the remainder, 47 per cent intended to stay with a foster or kinship carer, while 21 per cent thought they would rent alone. Overall, 11 per cent wanted to return to family (birth parents: eight per cent; other relatives: three per cent). Others thought of setting up their own

home with a partner (four per cent), while the several wanted shared accommodation (supported living or joint rental [17 per cent]).

The final section of the consultation introduced a 'hypothetical.' Young people were asked to estimate the likelihood of their achieving a range of outcomes under the two conditions: staying with a carer or living independently. The differential ratings given to the proposed achievements reflect the confidence young people feel when remaining in a stable, supported situation compared with if fending for themselves. For example, for the following areas, results presented show the percentages of respondents who felt 'quite likely' they would achieve the outcomes under the 'stay' vs. 'leave' conditions: Complete secondary school: 55 per cent vs. 31 per cent; undertake further study: 69 per cent vs. 31 per cent; obtain apprenticeships: 48 per cent vs. 20 per cent; obtaining full-time employment: 50 per cent vs. 31 per cent; obtaining part-time employment: 69 per cent vs. 40 per cent; and finally, finding suitable accommodation: 56 per cent vs. 28 per cent.

Implications

The findings of this study show that many young people in out-of-home care, in states where they have not yet experienced extended support, recognise a number of advantages that could stem from remaining longer with their carer. Clearly, the demand is evident with between one half and two thirds of young people in this sample interested in the option of continued placement support, and almost half intending to remain with a carer. Why are the three outlying governments in Australia not accepting the consistent evidence from around the world, or listening to the needs expressed by the children for whom they are responsible, and make extended support for those leaving the care system universal throughout the nation?

Cost would not seem to be a critical factor, since five other jurisdictions in the country have managed to fund an extended-care program, even in these parlous economic times affected by financial crises and pandemics. Indeed, the evidence is compelling that such support could even

represent a sound financial investment of public money.⁸ Possibly, it is simply a lack of political will. In spite of jurisdictions mouthing the 'best interests of the child' principle, some young people transitioning from care to adulthood in certain jurisdictions in Australia are treated as second-class citizens, not worthy of continued essential support after turning 18. Such unnecessary, differential treatment makes a mockery of Australia's 'fair go' ethos. Why should young people coming to the end of a difficult journey through out-of-home care be further disadvantaged simply because they live in certain parts of such an affluent country.

All governments (local, state, territory, and federal) must work together, and adopt comparable best practice, to do everything possible to ensure that young people transitioning from the care system have the support needed to give them the best chance of becoming valued and contributing members of society.

Endnotes

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