

LEAVING CARE IN PARTNERSHIP

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Greater family involvement is likely to be possible, and would be generally welcomed, by young people leaving care, according to research carried out at the University of Sheffield, and funded by the Department of Health.

The study involved 116 young people leaving care or accommodation, who were not going home, but who had some contact with their family. They could often describe wide family membership, but there was not a great deal of active involvement. There was confusion regarding the role and the future work of the social services. Leaving care was seen as a 'new start' for both family members and young people. There was a prospect for some greater involvement in the future, especially via 'key kin', if active steps were taken to encourage and support this.

YOUNG PEOPLE

Young people leaving care felt part of extensive family networks, with an average of over 20 members.

Social workers were aware of around 40% of the family members identified by young people.

Nearly all young people could nominate a family member they felt was of central importance to them, and this person equally felt a duty to 'be there' and possibly help. Only a quarter of these nominations for 'key kin' were the natural mother, less than half of the social worker nominations for 'key kin' coincided with young people's.

Family contact for most care leavers is infrequent, and where increases do occur, this is from an initially low level.

Young people made astute and logical judgements as to whom they might approach within their families for help in specific situations, and over time young peoples' selections reflected the 'ebb and flow' of their relationships with individual family members.

Young people were keen to ensure that any 'partnership' with their families did not result in family members feeling 'obliged' to do things for them after they left care.

FAMILY MEMBERS

Out of the 75 reviews that were held before leaving care, 49 had no family member present and of those that did, only 3 were 'key kin'.

Family members overwhelmingly felt that they had not been involved in work in partnership, whereas nearly half of social workers felt that partnership had been possible with care leaver's families.

Family members were not sure what support social services could or would offer young people after care, but hoped that social workers would 'keep an eye on' young people, and afford them a 'safety net' if things went wrong, especially in relation to accommodation.

SOCIAL WORKERS

Care leavers did appear to receive more support following on from the Children Act 1989, but there was still very little active professional encouragement of extended family involvement for these young people.

Social workers felt that the majority of care leavers were emotionally unprepared, and only adequately practically prepared for leaving care.

Social workers saw family members as a potential source of emotional and financial support for young people after care.

Social workers' interpretation of work in partnership with families tended to be restricted to work with parents, and especially to parents who attended review meetings.

For many years research studies have shown that young people leaving care have a range of social problems of the sort that families usually offer help for. However for many care leavers this help is not forthcoming: this study examined whether attempts to involve family more in partnership would be welcomed or resisted by the young person and/or the family members.

The findings of this research show that there is some willingness for greater involvement and that leaving care is seen as something of a new start with limited but important possibilities for greater involvement. It highlights the fact that acting as ‘family’ may encompass more than blood relatives, and that young people’s views of who to involve and how to involve them are vital. To achieve greater involvement will need some relatively small changes in practice, but they should pay substantial dividends in the future lives of care leavers.

THE SOCIAL SERVICES DEPARTMENTS

The 3 departments involved in the study had different models of handling the leaving care process, varying from a leaving care service that was dependent on social worker referral, to one that automatically involved a leaving care co-ordinator as advisor to the staff concerned. The likelihood of work in partnership with families was not associated with any specific model of leaving care support, but did seem to reflect social workers’ individual relationships with care leavers and their families.

THE YOUNG PEOPLE IN THE STUDY

There were 39 young men and 48 young women in the study, around 14% of whom had a heritage other than white European. At the outset of the study less than 4% of the young women were either pregnant or cared for dependent children, and over the course of one data collection period (8 months) this increased to nearly 10%. Due to limited social services’ records we were unable to identify a reasonable number of young people with disability to include in the study, and as a result can not be certain that our findings are representative of the experiences of this group.

Around 21% of the young people lived in residential care, with a further 44% in foster care and 35% in semi-independent style accommodation. Overall young people were described as poorly emotionally and only adequately practically prepared for independence by their social workers. Those in semi-independent accommodation were seen as somewhat better prepared than other groups, and more likely to enjoy improved quality and frequency of family relationships.

WHO WAS FAMILY FOR THE YOUNG PEOPLE IN THE STUDY?

Young people leaving care were aware of, and saw themselves as part of, large family networks with an average of over 20 members. Young people described a wide range of close and less close relatives as ‘family’, including aunts, uncles, cousins and other relatives in addition to parents and grandparents. A number nominated non-relatives such as foster family as well, and indicated that ‘honorary family’ could nonetheless feel as close as other relatives, and be as important for the practical and emotional support they might offer.

They could nearly all nominate a key family member who they felt was most important and who they could always contact for help or support. Family members who were nominated in this way as ‘key kin’ were themselves generally willing to accept a considerable level of responsibility for young people, and specifically a duty to ‘be there’ for them, providing emotional support as well as more practical help.

Young people in residential units were more likely than others to have lost contact with one side (usually paternal) of their family, and young people whose heritage was other than white European tended to describe slightly smaller family networks (average size 18.8) than other groups (average size 21.2). Social workers could identify around 40% of these family members.

FAMILY DIVERSITY AND FAMILY SUPPORT

The overwhelming majority of young people (41 of 43 in the interview group) were able to nominate one family member as the most important/influential person for them as they approached leaving care. Only 10 of the 41 were natural mothers; 12 of the 41 were men. There was wide diversity in family structure and in family cultures, but these key kin were of great importance to the young people, and they were willing to play a central role if needed. A model of how young people could be supported

by their families after care would resemble a target. At the centre are key kin, a second ring includes family members who, though willing to be involved in providing support, might not independently initiate support. A third ring includes family members who are known to the young people but are not likely to be involved in supporting them after care. The young people in our sample had very clear understanding of who they might approach for what, and this changed over time reflecting developing family circumstances, and the individual's perceived ability or willingness to help.

THE EFFECTS OF LEAVING CARE ON FAMILY RELATIONSHIPS

For families and young people the process of leaving care was characterised by a re-evaluation of their relationships with one another. Gaining independence and adult status offered an opportunity, not available whilst the young person was in care, for family members to take on a new role of support, and for the young person to accept such support.

Young people, family members and social workers all agreed that family contact and support after care was usually of benefit to young people, especially in the period directly after leaving care, but that the level of involvement after care tended to reflect the quality of contact as young people approached leaving care.

Family members envisaged that contact with young people would become easier once social services were no longer involved, and once young people had a 'place of their own'.

Once young people had established the greater independence and adult status involved with leaving care, it was overwhelmingly accepted by all that although family might continue to 'care about' young people, it would no longer be appropriate or acceptable for them to directly 'care for' young people.

A significant number of the young women leaving care become pregnant (10% of the sample identified themselves as pregnant by the end of relevant fieldwork, but it is likely that this is an under-reporting). The young mothers-to-be were generally positive about pregnancy and the wider family supportive.

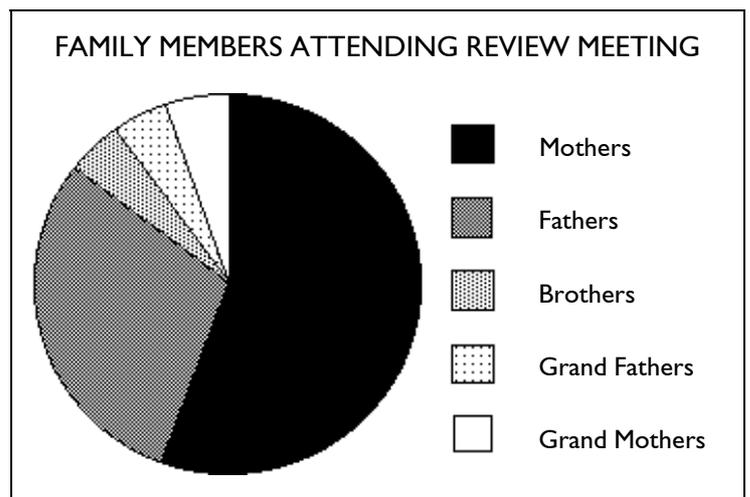
VIEWS OF PARTNERSHIP

Social workers and family members expressed contrasting explanations of partnership primarily based on service. Workers were keen to ensure that family members offered as much support to care leavers as possible, while family members wished to ensure that social workers continued to offer access to services, and other practical help, so that young people did not 'miss out'.

Young people and family members recognised that whilst in care, an imbalance of authority existed in any work in partnership, implicitly empowering social services, but once a young person left care this was no longer felt to be the case.

FORMAL INVOLVEMENT AND PARTICIPATION

Most review meetings in the period approaching leaving care were not attended by family members (49 of 75). Where family members did attend reviews it was parents, and especially mothers, who were most likely to take part. Regarding who was important to the young person, social workers identified the same family member as key kin for only 17 of the 41 care leavers. Only 3 of the 41 people nominated as key kin attended the review.



WHO DOES WHAT, AND WHO SHOULD DO WHAT?

Social workers recognised the importance of family 'being there' for care leavers, and some felt that loss of family contact and support might have negative consequences after care. Around half of the social workers in the sample recognised that their own contact with young people would decrease after care. However families were unclear how to be involved, and how this might fit in with social services. Young people risked being left in the middle.

KEY POLICY IMPLICATIONS

Care Leavers and Families.

Establish 'who is family' and key kin. Young people generally welcome dialogue and negotiation with their social workers to establish who is 'family', with a clear reassurance that any concerns they may have in relation to family involvement will be fully taken into account. It is important to young people that family members who they did not want to be included in partnership should be identified, along with key kin. Partnership with key kin is vital and could often be extended through them to the wider family members and to others. Potential barriers to partnership, such as mistrust of social services by the family, do need to be acknowledged, discussed and where possible resolved, as they often form the context of leaving care.

Meetings.

Arrange one or more less formal and more family-oriented decision-making meetings. Family members did not interpret attending reviews as evidence of work in partnership, although social workers often did. A different, less formal style of meeting, probably away from social work offices and outside office hours may encourage and enable more family members to attend meetings and participate in partnership arrangements.

Obligation and Reciprocal Responsibilities.

Avoid young people feeling that it is a one way partnership between them and their families. Young people were anxious that family partnership might result in family members feeling 'obliged' to help them, especially if formal agreements or contracts were drawn up. Ideally partnerships with family members should, like the meetings that may be needed to form them, be phrased and developed in a way that is 'family-like' and is based on continuing communication. Family partnership with care leavers also needs to acknowledge that, once young people have established their own independent adult status, they are like other young people leaving home, and they may have reciprocal responsibilities toward their families. It is important that it does not feel all one way.

Record Keeping.

Provide a clear, up to date, and full family tree. Family information on care leavers case files was limited, frequently out of date and sometimes inaccurate. In discussion social workers could give a slightly fuller picture of family membership but this information is easily lost when staff move on. Some form of family tree record for young people should be carefully constructed and regularly updated, and given the importance of personal knowledge it is very important that, as far as possible, young people should retain the same social worker through the period of leaving care.

Social Services After Care.

Clarify what social services will provide after care. Family members were unsure what role and responsibilities social services would continue to hold after care, and were keen that young people did not 'miss out' especially in relation to accommodation, financial help and personal support. A clear statement, perhaps in the form of an information pack, would help and should be given to all family members.

THE RESEARCH STUDY

The focus of the study was young people age 16 to 18 years, who were approaching leaving care, and who retained some level of family contact, but did not plan to return to live with family members at the point of leaving care. The study was based in three contrasting social services departments: a county, a metropolitan district and a large city, and information was gathered from a detailed file review of all looked after young people in the participating departments (160), this revealed 116 care leavers in contact with, but not returning to family.

87 young people formed the research sample, and additional information was gathered from social workers for this group, concerning the young person, partnership, family and family involvement. 43 young people were interviewed, as were 34 family members (nominated by young people as their 'most important/influential' family member) and 22 social workers. The interviews covered family knowledge, desire for contact, perceived barriers to contact, and the range of responsibilities felt and carried out. A further 21 interviews were carried out with a sample of the young people to see how their views may change over time, and to follow up details and puzzles from the first interviews.

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FURTHER INFORMATION ABOUT THIS PROJECT

Leaving Care in Partnership: family involvement with care leavers. A book by Peter Marsh and Mark Peel, published by the Stationery Office, 1999 (ISBN 0 11 322250 5 Price £16.99) as part of the Department of Health's series on post Children Act research. Available through bookshops, or telephone the Stationery Office direct on: 0870 600 5522

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Research Issues in Social Work Education and Training No 1. Editors: P Marsh & C Clark. 1990. Printed copies are available from the address below. Price £3.00 including p&p

Books

Family Group Conferences in Child Welfare 1998 Peter Marsh & Gill Crow. ISBN 0 632 04922 7. Available from bookshops or contact Marston Book Services Tel: 01235 465500 Price £17.49 including p&p.

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