



OPPORTUNITIES FOR YOUNG CARELEAVERS

Supporting education and training opportunities for young careleavers

Children and young people who have had contact with the child protection system have poorer educational outcomes than their peers with no out-of-home care (OOHC) experiences.¹ They are also more likely to experience homelessness, criminal justice interventions, unemployment, and poorer physical and mental health outcomes.² This summary will review features of OOHC associated with negative educational outcomes. There is limited Australian research which has examined effective ways of improving the educational attainment of careleavers.

What factors contribute to the educational outcomes of children and young people with care experiences?

Prior to entering care, most children who have been removed from their parental home have faced a range of challenges, such as trauma, early disadvantage, a lack of bonding with a caregiver and a lack of exposure to language and literacy. These factors can all contribute to negative educational outcomes.⁴

Experiences while in care, such as teachers lacking the skills to appropriately respond to the complex learning needs and styles of children in OOHC, can also contribute. Lack of stability in care and the lack of availability of suitable placements have also been identified as factors increasing vulnerability.⁵

Respondents to the CREATE Foundation's 2019 survey of careleavers⁶ reported a range of reasons for not completing secondary school, including finding the work too hard, lack of support, placement instability and changes of school. Nine per cent of the CREATE cohort had left school because they had been excluded, suspended or expelled.

A number of factors have been identified as being associated with more successful educational outcomes for careleavers, including:

- being in home-based placements and experiencing fewer placements⁶
- feeling secure and stable in care, and having a sense of continuity and social support post-care¹¹
- having ongoing support from a close relationship with an adult.¹²

International research consistently identifies reforms that are needed to improve outcomes for careleavers. These include improving the quality of care and placement stability while children and young people are in care, and also enabling a more gradual and flexible transition from care and continued access to aftercare support.¹³

What programs and supports are available for careleavers and which are effective?

The National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children (2021–2031)¹⁴ identified children and young people who have experienced abuse and/or neglect, including children in OOHC and young people leaving OOHC and transitioning to adulthood, as priority groups due to their increased levels of vulnerability relative to other young people.

Queensland offers a post-transition support service. Since 2015, young Queenslanders aged 15 to 21 years have been able to access Next Step After Care, a service funded by Child Safety. Next Step After Care was replaced by Next Step Plus in 2020. Next Step Plus extended the age of post-care support to 25 years and provides a range of support, including assistance with relationships, managing money and finding accommodation.¹⁵

A recent systematic scoping review examined the effectiveness of Australian transition interventions for young people leaving care.¹⁶ Next Step Plus was not included as it has not yet been evaluated. The review found 11 relevant Australian studies (two were peer-reviewed and nine came from the grey literature).

The reviewed interventions had primarily adopted a case management approach to support careleavers' transitions. Interventions facilitated improvements in careleavers' independent living outcomes (e.g., housing, education, and financial stability).

Program duration varied from 12 months to five years. Programs offering longer term support (commencing prior to young people leaving care at age 16 and continuing to age 21) were more effective. Only one study tailored support to young people who identified as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander peoples.

A total of five out of nine grey literature studies evaluated the impact of transition programs on educational outcomes and found some evidence of effectiveness in supporting careleavers to overcome barriers to continuing or finishing education.

The authors concluded that the Australian evidence base is still under development and that there remains a lack of published evaluations regarding the implementation and impact of OOHC transition interventions.

Improving careleaver outcomes: The impact of extending care arrangements

There is a growing body of evidence demonstrating the impact of extending care provisions for young people as a means of providing more supportive transitions and ongoing support.

Extending OOHC encourages continued education which in turn raises the probability of employment and the average income of careleavers. Extending OOHC may bring future benefits to the children of those receiving extended care and support, given that children's outcomes (health, education, income) have been found to be significantly associated with their parents' earnings and socio-economic status.¹⁷

Ending OOHC arrangements at age 18 has been identified as a key factor increasing the vulnerability of careleavers.⁷ Leaving OOHC can often mean that a young person may lose their

support networks and also their housing. The loss of stable accommodation and financial support can make it feel impossible for a careleaver to consider higher education.⁴

On average, non-careleavers transition from their family home and into independence at 24 years of age.⁹ Due to the physical, developmental, and psychological impact of their trauma, young people in care are often at a younger developmental age than their chronological age¹⁰ and are less well-prepared to make a successful transition into adulthood.

In June 2022 the Queensland Government announced funding for a new range of measures to support young people leaving care. These include continuing the carers allowance for 19 to 21-year-olds remaining at home and providing financial support and mentoring for young people aged 18 to 21 leaving non-family-based care.

Internationally, a number of countries have implemented policies and programs to extend care. At least four rigorous international studies have demonstrated that extending care produces positive outcomes for careleavers, including increased engagement with education and employment prospects; as well as reduced levels of homelessness, alcohol and drug dependency, and interactions with the justice system.³

Key findings from these international studies relating to educational outcomes were that:

- 55 per cent of UK young people who remained in foster care until age 19 were enrolled in full-time education versus 22 per cent who had exited care¹⁸
- within a sample of Californian young people,

each year in extended foster care through to 21 years significantly increased the probability that they would complete secondary school.¹⁹

An analysis conducted by Deloitte estimated that every dollar invested in extending care arrangements for Queensland young people would be associated with an expected return to government of \$2.69 in either savings or increased income.³

Conclusion

The research on factors associated with negative educational outcomes such as lack of school completion for careleavers is well established. Children and young people in contact with the child protection system face challenges before they enter care, are often not well supported while in care and do not receive sufficient support as they exit care.

Supporting more stable placements while in care and ensuring children and young people have the ongoing support of a close adult can contribute to more positive outcomes.

The Australian literature about the types of transitional supports that can assist with successful transitions from care is quite limited. Additional investment in evaluations is needed to identify features of programs that are effective.

Finally, there is a growing body of evidence around the value of extending formal care provisions to age 21. Given the potential lifetime negative consequences of educational failure, extending care arrangements is a cost-effective option for government.

Seeking your feedback

This research summary addresses one of the topics within the Queensland Family and Child Commission's research agenda. The research agenda identifies opportunities to expand the evidence base and to improve services and outcomes around matters that are relevant to Queensland children, young people and families. We welcome your feedback on this research summary which can be provided via the QR code.



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