

## ESRC Seminar Series:

### **Teenagers in foster care: the critical role of carers and other adults**

Possible themes of work that are generated by the seminar series

1. Relationships:
  - a. The relationship between quality of attachment to carers and experiences of care that exacerbate or reduce risk/vulnerability
  - b. The role of carers among other relationships in the young person's world, and the quality/type of those relationships (close/professional)
  - c. Foster care and social capital as teenagers leave care
2. Foster care as a profession:
  - a. The forms of recruitment, training and support that will provide sufficient numbers of good foster carers for teenagers
  - b. The specific forms of knowledge and training needed (e.g. sexual health/risk, offending, drugs and alcohol)
  - c. The shape of treatment/specialist foster care for teenagers and its relationship to stability and attachment
3. Risk and strength-based responses
  - a. The theories, training, and tools that help foster carers look beyond challenging symptoms and behavior
4. Education
  - a. Unofficial forms of exclusion where the system does not take account of the needs of teenagers in care

**Seminar One: How views of parenting and teenagers apply to foster care  
16th January 2014**

**Key points**

**Fostering teenagers**

1. Adolescence is a unique stage of development that presents particular challenges for foster carers e.g. managing increasingly complex relationships with peers and birth families that are often mediated by smartphones, and having to strike a balance between promoting independence and offering protection within a social care system that is often inherently risk averse.
2. There is insufficient research and support that acknowledges the unique challenges of fostering this group, and a need for evidence-based tools and training to be developed that draw on the approaches/theories mentioned below and which improve the status and supervision of those caring for teenagers.

**Resources and tools for improving the care of teenagers**

3. Parenting interventions are at least as, and sometimes more, effective for teenagers as they are for younger children, so there is potential for such interventions to be used in developing training programs for foster carers.
4. Important approaches/theories for improving support for teenagers and their carers include:
  - a. attachment, permanence and belonging that together create a secure base and help to build resilience in teenagers' lives;
  - b. a broad understanding of stability which recognises the importance of carers' attitudes toward birth families, and the need for flexibility between types of placement in order to provide continuity of relationships;
  - c. a consideration of parenting styles, which can help us understand the difference between coercive and appropriate control when managing difficult behaviour; and
  - d. strength based approaches that affirm the competency of young people to contribute to decisions made about their lives.

**Focusing on education**

5. Training is needed to enable foster carers to advocate for teenagers' education, schools to be more flexible and better informed in responding to need, and social workers to better facilitate these relationships.
6. The pupil premium is welcome, but carers requested that they be included in decision-making about how it will be spent, and argued for the flexibility to spend it on extra-school activities where appropriate

## Seminar Two: Fostering Adolescents: sex, risks and rights

2<sup>nd</sup> April 2014

### Key points

**1. Teenagers in care may be particularly vulnerable to forms of sexual abuse/violence**

Many teenagers in care have had experiences prior to coming into care that make it more challenging for them to experience healthy sexual relationships. In some cases the experience of being in care can further exacerbate that risk, and there are growing concerns about peer-on-peer abuse, and gang related and online sexual exploitation.

**2. These risks should be viewed critically as we listen to young people and promote their sexual rights and well-being**

A positive focus on sexual health could counter-balance a predominant view of teenagers in care as victims or 'at risk'. Taking a critical view of concepts of risk can remind us of the different perspectives young people bring, and the importance of viewing teenagers as whole people with strengths and choices.

**3. Harmful/ risky sexual behaviour should be considered and responded to in the wider contexts that promote or challenge it**

Responses to sexual abuse/violence often focus on the home, but preventative and risk-reducing measures need to be directed at the many other spaces teenagers inhabit, including their community, school, peer group and online world, as well as the wider societies that shape these experiences.

**4. Better sex education within schools is crucial to the support of teenagers in foster care**

Many concerns for teenagers centre on the abusive norms that are increasingly present in aspects of their culture, and that promote gender inequality. In response it was argued in the seminar that schools should promote sexual health in its broadest sense by being sites where critical awareness of these norms is fostered.

**5. Foster care therefore has a significant, but partial, role to play in promoting sexual health**

Safe and trusting relationships with foster carers are a powerful tool for safeguarding young people and building their agency and resilience in day to day life. Carers can also be trained to be aware of, and mitigate some of, the risks to young people in the spheres mentioned above.

**6. Foster carers need specific resources and training to play their part in promoting sexual health**

Foster carers felt that they still lacked the relevant information about young people that would enable them to be supported more effectively in the home. It was suggested that resources, training and peer support be made available to foster carers to equip them to appropriately discuss sexual health with children, and to help them identify risks around peer/gang and online exploitation.

## Seminar Three: Future directions for effective interdisciplinary youth justice systems

25<sup>th</sup> June 2014

### Key points

#### 1. Foster care has the potential to reduce risk of offending

The same risk factors may precipitate entry to care and contact with the criminal justice system. While some experiences of care can exacerbate offending behaviour, positive experiences of foster care can also reduce the risk of offending. This may be through relational mechanisms that provide positive alternative sources of activity, peer groups and family life. It can also be as an alternative to custody, which may otherwise increase the chances of re-offending.

#### 2. UK trials of evidence-based parenting/fostering interventions have had mixed results in terms of reducing offending behaviour

Functional Family Therapy appears to have no impact on offending and related outcomes, and funding is required to evaluate the impact of Fostering Changes for adolescents on outcomes related to criminality. Multidimensional Treatment Foster Care for Adolescents is most effective for young people with serious anti-social behaviour, but in the Intensive Fostering trial its positive effects were not maintained post-placement.

#### 3. There is openness among European Union member states to the use of remand and intensive foster care as an alternative to custody, despite various obstacles.

A project being led by the British Association for Adoption and Fostering has found positive engagement from European partners, including Italy, Hungary, and Bulgaria on the use of fostering as an alternative to detention, despite a number of cultural, social, political and economic obstacles. In Sweden there is a recognised need to address poor outcomes for young offenders in secure youth care.

#### 4. The quality and stability of relationships, education provision, support during transitions, and availability of placements are all crucial contexts that affect a foster care experience/intervention

- Young people need consistent safe relationships that don't just focus on the symptoms of their behaviour. This raises questions about the design of interventions that offer short-term relationships, as well as who is best placed to offer that support.
- Young people need support for transitions through and out of care
- Education provision needs to improve to meet the needs of teenagers who offend.
- There are insufficient appropriate placements available for young people (including as alternatives to custody)

#### 5. Foster carers of teenagers who offend are in need of particular kinds of support, including advocacy on behalf of young people, access to professional advice, and support for discipline.

## Seminar Four: Migrant children in foster care

11<sup>th</sup> November 2014

### Key Points

- 1. Separated children arrive into foster care managing difficult experiences and multiple pressures in their journey toward settlement.** These include displacement, loss of family, abuse and persecution. They then have to manage the multiple, and sometimes conflicting, ways they are processed by the state where immigration concerns can take precedence over access to welfare.
- 2. These complex and competing forces mean that foster carers often need to accept uncertainty, ambiguity, mistrust and silence as they care for separated teenagers.** Asylum-seeking young people live with uncertainty about their futures and may have multiple reasons not to discuss their lives fully until they are sure they can trust the adults around them. Foster carers need adequate support in order to be patient and accepting in these contexts
- 3. The strength of good foster care is its ability to help reconstruct a sense of 'ordinary' life for separated children.** Journeys toward settlement include achieving safety, belonging and success, and foster care can be a crucial support in each phase. Although not all separated children want to be in foster care, the majority who are find it a positive experience and value being included as one of the family.
- 4. Separated children need access to relationships that can offer friendship and stability, as well as professional support.** Swedish research suggests there is value in mapping whether unaccompanied young people have 'close' and 'professional' relationships, and considering the role of the state in facilitating both. This might include clarifying the role of foster carers, voluntary agencies, and potentially guardians.
- 5. Foster carers need support to understand and respond to the needs of separated young people.** Most carers of separated teenagers are very positive about their work, but also recognise its challenges, and do not necessarily feel equipped to respond. There is potential for training, mentoring, and peer support to address some of these challenges.
- 6. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child is a good framework for constructing support for separated young people,** because it recognises children's needs across legal, welfare, and social domains.
- 7. The seminar highlighted a number of areas for further consideration,** including clarifying the types of relationships/support separated young people need, and the role of foster care for post-16/18 support for independence.

## Seminar Five: Innovative Approaches to support young people transitioning from care to adulthood

17<sup>th</sup> March 2015

### Key Points

- 1. Care leavers experience consistently poor outcomes across a range of international contexts, but have differential access to ongoing support depending on national policy and practice.** This includes different forms of allowing young people to stay on in placements as young adults, or transition slowly into independent accommodation.
- 2. Scandinavian nations with universalist policy frameworks may support care leavers better through their generous welfare systems, but are not yet providing sufficient targeted support.** This is partly the result of a lack of legislation offering post-care support, but also because young people are not sufficiently shaping that provision themselves.
- 3. Young people leaving care have very similar aspirations to their peers, but many can't access the kinds of social capital and support that they need to achieve these.** Young people's drive to overcome adversity should be recognised and fostered, while ensuring that they aren't left to achieve this alone.
- 4. Education should be central to improving long term outcomes for children leaving care, and yet many nations have very little research or focus on this.** Given the disruption many have experienced, investment in education for care leavers needs to be longer-term, and recognise their potential.
- 5. Those who experience leaving care positively report on having access to supportive relationships, advice, were kept well informed, and were involved in planning their transitions.**
- 6. Swedish participants identified a series of areas for improvement during discussion groups, with implications for social services, leaving care services and foster carers.** These included: assessment processes that facilitate targeted support; investing in the dialogue skills of social workers; access to therapeutic support post-care; and ensuring foster carers are equipped to support education.
- 7. Future research could evaluate leaving care provision against resilience promoting factors in different countries**