

Self-study notes

Unit No. 1 An introduction to being looked after: Dispelling the myths

Unit objectives

- To acquire information about looked after children and care leavers in Scotland.
- To consider why they are at particular risk of having poor outcomes, including low educational attainment, and physical and mental health difficulties.
- To emphasise that despite barriers, looked after children can and do achieve.
- To draw attention to the impact individual workers can have in providing encouragement and in holding high aspirations for children.
- To explain how support for looked after children sits within the Getting it Right for Every Child (GIRFEC) approach.
- To reflect on the implications for your own work context and professional responsibilities.

Outline of Unit

- Introduction
- Craig's experiences of being looked after
- Who is looked after in Scotland?
- What are some of the facts, myths and stereotypes about these children and care leavers?
- What is expected of professionals and how can individual workers help?

Introduction

You can study this unit different ways.

For example, if you have only one hour available, we suggest following the approach outlined in the bullets below. Otherwise follow the entire unit and expect to need to allocate two to three hours, depending on the amount of additional reading you choose to do.

- Read the study aims below
- View the film, "Craig's Story", followed by the reflection activity
- Read the study notes on Who is Looked After in Scotland
- Download and read the leaflet Working Together to Improve Outcomes

(Scottish Government, 2009) (pdf)

Study aims

This session aims to provide you with an introduction to children and care leavers who are looked after in Scotland. As a group, they are particularly disadvantaged and are at risk of having low educational attainment and mental health difficulties. Despite the challenges presented by the life-event difficulties typically experienced by looked after children and care leavers, it is known that positive attitudes by professionals and co-ordinated approaches by agencies can make dramatic differences. The unit is designed to provide background to the issues for all who work with looked after children and also to act as an introduction to a more detailed training programme for particular professionals.

Study notes

Children become 'looked after' when the state intervenes in their upbringing for a range of reasons. They can be looked after 'at home' or 'away from home'.

Definition:

AT HOME Child is subject of a compulsory supervision order with no condition of residence through the Children's Hearing system. Child continues to live with parent(s) or carer.

AWAY FROM HOME Child is either (a) subject of a compulsory supervision order with a condition of residence through the Children's Hearing system, (b) secured in a placement under a permanence order, or (c) provided with accommodation by a local authority under Section 25 of the Children (Scotland) Act 1995 (often referred to as a 'voluntary arrangement'). Child is separated from parent(s) or carer, and lives in foster care, kinship care, a children's home, residential school or secure unit.

Some children will have experienced a number of separate episodes of being looked after, possibly in different kinds of placements. Placement moves often necessitate changes of school.

Activity

Note down, or think about, the possessions, attributes and beliefs you were given as children by the people who brought you up which you value now – not just toys or other objects, but also values and skills.

Study notes

You might have thought about gaining a sense of identity, values, positive experiences, a moral framework and confidence/self-esteem. How this was done? Perhaps by displaying warmth, showing interest, by involvement, routines, family events and celebrations, stability and predictability. Children who are looked

after may not have had many of these positive experiences. For those who become separated from their family, the actual separation may undermine any good relationships they have. Children who are separated from parents and siblings often worry about the wellbeing of their significant family members. If you have had positive early experiences you may find it hard to appreciate what is really happening in the lives of looked after children and young people. It might help to think about how it might feel to be separated from your family or, if you have children, to have someone from outside the family visit to talk about your parenting behaviour.

Activity: "Craig's Story"

Download from the DVD-ROM the film "Craig's Story", designed to help you to understand being looked after from the perspective of a child, and also the possible effects on social, emotional and educational development.

After viewing the film, spend a little time in reflection about your reaction to "Craig's Story". What feelings and thoughts did the film provoke for you (a) personally and (b) professionally? List, or think about, actions you could take, either individually or collaboratively.

Key points:

- The intention of the film is to demonstrate vividly that looked after children can be seriously disadvantaged in adult life by their pre-care experiences.
- The film highlights the impact of trauma and neglect on children's development.
- For some children, the looked after system can add to the disadvantages they experience through placement instability and insufficient support at key transition times.
- Stability in care and educational support is important.
- Educational success is a very important predictor of good adult outcomes for looked after children.
- Many looked after children do very well at school and with appropriate intervention those who have fallen behind in their education can be helped to overcome barriers to learning and raise their attainment.

Study notes: Who is looked after in Scotland?

The term 'looked after,' originally introduced by the Children (Scotland) Act 1995, signifies the role of a local authority in assisting and supporting families, rather than taking over from them. The term 'corporate parent' is used to describe the statutory responsibilities that various public sector have towards looked after children and care leavers. A child usually becomes looked after as a result of a supervision order made by a Children's Hearing. A smaller proportion

are looked after as a result of a voluntary arrangement between the family and their local authority. Many looked after children are subject to a supervision order while continuing to live 'at home', while others live 'away from home' in a range of settings, including foster care, kinship care, residential care, residential schools, and secure care (slide 3).

You will find more detailed information at the following sources:

- Children's Hearing system web site: www.childrens-hearings.co.uk
- CELCIS website: www.celcis.org
- Scottish Government statistics about children & young people: www.scotland.gov.uk/Topics/Statistics/Browse/Children

Activity

There are many myths about looked after children and care leavers and the following activity is designed to dispel some of the myths.

Download the hand-out, Being Looked After Quiz: Dispelling the Myths. Decide which of the ten questions are true and which are false. When you have completed this, download the hand-out, Being Looked After Quiz: Dispelling the Myths - Answers. The key point is that even though a proportion of children become looked after as a result of involvement with the criminal justice system, the needs of the child are always regarded as paramount. If you want to look up statistical information for yourself, you will find a considerable amount of detail, over several years, on the Scottish Government website <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Topics/Statistics/Browse/Children> (follow looked after children link)

Activity

This activity is designed for staff in educational settings but it is relevant to all with an interest in looked after children in the educational context. The aim of the activity is to think about the differences in attitudes towards looked after children and pupils in schools implied by the two accounts written by teacher education students on placement. These are genuine rather than fictional accounts. We would require more information to make any judgements about the schools, and students on placement can have limited perspectives. On the other hand, the accounts have value because they pick up different atmospheres which will have implications for the educational progress of pupils who are looked after.

Download the hand-out, Observations by Secondary Education Students on Placement, and consider this question: 'Reflect on the differences in ethos portrayed and the possible ways in which this might act as barriers to the progress of looked after children.'

Study notes

Support for looked after children within the principles and values of Getting it Right for Every Child (GIRFEC). If you are unfamiliar with GIRFEC, you will find a helpful account in A Guide to Getting it Right for Children and Families (Scottish Government, 2012) available

at <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Topics/People/Young-People/gettingitright/publications/practice-guide> .

There is a legal obligation (within the Education (Scotland) (Additional Support for Learning) Act 2009) for local authorities to assume that all looked after children have additional support needs and to consider whether as a result they require to have a 'co-ordinated support plan'. For more information see Circular 1/2009 and the Code of Practice (2009), both available as pdf documents on the DVD-ROM.

Key messages

- The aim of the session/course is to draw attention to the typically poor outcomes of looked after children and young people and to stimulate action leading to improvements. But, as Hare and Bullock (2006) point out, it is possible to: 'reinforce negative stereotypes of looked after children and young people that not only insult them as individuals but also make it virtually impossible for them to make their way in the world' (p.35). (The Hare & Bullock article is available on the DVD-ROM.)
- Many looked after children and young people do very well at school and with appropriate intervention those who have fallen behind in their education can be helped to overcome barriers to learning and raise their attainment.
- The Scottish Government has made looked after children and young people a priority group within the general commitment to tackling poverty and disadvantage. A range of public sector bodies, not just social work agencies/professionals, have particular duties towards looked after children and young people. This includes the 'corporate parenting' duties of those organisations listed in schedule 4 of the Children and Young People (Scotland) Act 2014).
- Children can be looked after 'at home' and 'away from home'.
- Schools should know which pupils are looked after and should liaise with social workers and carers to ensure that specific educational objectives are included in the Child's Plan. Every school should appoint a designated manager who has responsibility for pupils who are looked after. The role includes ensuring that appropriate support arrangements are in place, discussing with the child what information should be disclosed to teachers and how this will be done, monitoring key indicators, such as attendance and attainment.