

STIGMA, RIGHTS, RESILIENCE AND STABILITY

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Abstract

Representatives of the Youth Council of the Care to Independence Programme, reflecting on their personal experience and knowledge, identify the issues that are most critical to the ability of young people in care to flourish. The Youth Council’s concerns focus on the areas of stigma (being prejudged as “kids in care”), rights (the rights to support past the age of 17 and to responsive guardianship), resilience (which comes of being valued, loved, given attention, supported and cared for) and stability (receiving good placements that last). The Youth Council’s representatives took the opportunity of the *Australasian Conference on Child Abuse and Neglect* to speak directly to the social workers, service providers and policymakers present.

BACKGROUND

A ministerial review of the Department of Child, Youth and Family Services (CYF), together with other independent research, established that a serious gap existed in provision for young people leaving care in New Zealand. As a result, the Government gave Child, Youth and Family funding in 2003 to develop a service to support young people leaving care who cannot return to family or remain with caregivers.

The Transition from Care to Independence Initiative is a four-year Auckland-wide pilot contracted by Child, Youth and Family and undertaken by two community agencies – Dingwall Trust’s Launch project and Youth Horizons’ Ka Awatea project. The initiative is aimed at assisting young people who have been in state care to make a supported and successful transition from care to independent living in the community.

The service provides a “leaving care” team with four Personal Advisors from each organisation and a range of transition and after-care services. Youth participation is an important element, and a Youth Council was developed in order to provide a forum for youth to share their voice.

The Youth Council is collaboratively run by both Dingwall Trust and Youth Horizons and came into being in September 2004. Since then it has grown and developed to the stage where young people are taking active part in discussions and they feel empowered to make changes in a system in which they have been a central part. The Youth Council meets monthly and follows an agenda and structure that enable them to be part of the whole process, from facilitation to evaluation.

The authors of this paper, four young people from Dingwall Trust – Renee (17 years old), Janelle (16), Kenneth (17) and Jane (18) – represented the Care to Independence Programme’s Youth Council in presenting the following keynote address at the 10th Australasian Conference on Child Abuse and Neglect, symbolising “the voice of the nation that cannot be heard” of young people in care.

INTRODUCTION (RENEE)

In this paper, members of the Care to Independence programme’s Youth Council will share their thoughts, insights and expertise on what young people in care need in order to blossom. This knowledge comes from their own and other Youth Council members’ first-hand experiences and the continuing impact these have on their lives.

When asked what young people in care need in order to blossom, the Youth Council identified four important areas: stigma, rights, resilience and stability.

STIGMA (RENEE)

Hi, I am Renee. On behalf of the Youth Council, I am presenting our concerns about stigma.

When people judge us without taking the time to get to know us, it makes us feel like we have been robbed of the right to be treated as the unique individuals that we are.

Everybody says that young people are the future of this country. But when young people are having to deal with unnecessary judgements on a daily basis it makes us feel devalued, alone and disempowered.

All people in today’s society have to deal with being stereotyped and prejudged. Judgements are often made based on the way we dress, our skin colour, height and weight.

As we grow older we find ways to deal with the hurt that comes from these unnecessary judgements. However, for a young person, these judgments are really confusing and difficult to deal with and can make you feel like you are worth nothing and of no value to anyone.

I, myself, have had the unpleasant experience of explaining to people in power that I am in care and, sadly, the result is that I am treated like I have done something wrong or may even be a threat or bad influence on other kids. This is stigma. *I do not deserve the bad press.* No young person does, we need understanding and compassion instead.

The care system is there to protect us from others, not others from us. Just because we are in care does not justify our being treated differently – often this is based on society’s perception of what “type” of people end up in care. This is stigma.

In a world like we have today, having to cope with stigma is really hard. We already have a lot of pressure on us. We face the pressure to fit in, take drugs, drink alcohol – join gangs. Add to this, that many young people on the youth council feel that social workers also prejudge them.

Please do not judge us. Do not label us as “kids in care”. We are more than our CYF status. We are individuals with individual stories. We are, as I said, rarely in care due to any fault of our own, and if, for some reasons, we may have made some mistakes in the past, *please* allow us to have a second chance.

The Youth Council would like you to remember that notes, assessments and professional opinions from years ago should not be viewed as being “Holy Writ”, or a definitive indication of who we are.

Because young people in care want to be given the chance to show people who they really are. Every young person should have the opportunity to do this. People need to recognise that we are not our notes – this is about respecting our uniqueness.

The Youth Council would like to emphasise the importance of care and welfare professionals giving us the chance to show the real us. Because, maybe, if social workers and caregivers would get to know us outside of the written word, they would get to know the positives of us and not just the negative. Experience has often shown us that if someone expects bad things from you for long enough, eventually you will prove them right.

Stigma is about labelling, and labels last a very long time. The dictionary describes stigma as “a mark of social disgrace”. Being labelled “kids in care” and “CYF’s kids” have become this mark. So call me Renee, not your client or kid in care. Remember my likes, not my case number – then I will be free of your stigma.

So, do not refer to a caseload. It is about people, human beings, young and hopeful.

We need your care, support, belief and encouragement. Help us to see our strengths, our potential, and then we will develop a sense of self-worth and we will have a healthy base from which to grow strong.

RIGHTS (KENNETH)

Hi, my name is Kenneth. The Youth Council wants me to discuss young people’s rights in care.

I have been in care since I was seven years old. Child, Youth and Family have been a big part of my life up until I turned 15, when they decided that they would stop contact with me when I turned 17.

The thing is, though, I was not ready. I was not independent enough. I have had CYF by my side since I was seven and then they suddenly want to discharge me? I need support to become independent. Surely, that is my right.

I also have the right to remain at school after leaving care. But I need support to stay at school. Keep me in school.

If I was with my parents, they would support me, but I have not been with them since I was seven. You have been my guardians up until now. So why do you want to suddenly pull away my main support when I need it the most?

I want to be independent but I need time and help to become independent. I need your help and support after I am 17.

I do not want to end up like some of my mates who were discharged from CYF at, or before, 17 – who are now into drugs, alcohol and prostitution. One has even committed suicide. Maybe, if they had been able to stay with CYF and be supported to develop their skills to become independent, maybe their lives would have been different.

We, the Youth Council, also want you to know that we want a pamphlet on our rights. We want to know the complaints procedure. We want to know what the consequences are for people who do not hold our rights.

Why do we not have this?

Young people in care also want to see their social workers and for their social workers to really listen to them and try and understand their wishes, opinions and feelings. Young people in care also want their opinions to actually be considered and included in decisions made about their lives.

The Youth Council also wants you to know that they want their social worker to be there for them, that if they telephone their social workers, that it is for a reason. Young people in care want their social workers to call them back.

Do not just leave us hanging.

Young people also have the right to have a social worker who can understand and speak their language. Young people in care want their social workers to keep their promises and not say one thing and do the opposite. We want and need to know what is going on and that our opinions are important.

We have the right to be placed in a caregiver placement that is safe, stable, supportive and caring. Some young people in care are still being beaten – the Youth Council wants you to know that. Please make sure that you choose caregivers and our placements well. If you do, we have more of a chance to blossom.

The point of not receiving clothing grants or having our medical and dental costs being paid for was also raised by the Youth Council. Please do not make us plead or go without these basic rights.

The Youth Council also wants to know if it is always necessary for our friends and their families to know that we have a CYF social worker whenever we want to stay with friends. Can't you just trust our caregivers to decide if it is OK for us to stay with our friends – just like a normal parent would?

Remember, you are often our guardians. We need you to take good care of us and to make sure that our rights are kept.

RESILIENCE (JANELLE)

Hello, my name is Janelle. I will represent my own personal story of resilience and other stories from the Youth Council.

Resilience is more than just the ability to “bounce back” naturally, with no help or any influence from one’s environment.

When we come into care, we have been uprooted from everyone and everything we know. We believe that resilience is a process that is influenced by an individual’s environment and how their environment responds to their requirements and needs. You cannot build resilience from neglect.

Like a plant, young people need care, love and the basic necessities to grow and thrive. Resilience is built through nurturing and positive stable relationships. Relationships with family, friends, caregivers and with people like you. Without positive relationships we cannot grow and blossom into the beautiful flowers that we have the potential to become.

I am resilient today because I was not judged by the people who were immediately around me. This meant that I could be myself and grow up to be who I wanted to be – the young woman you see before you today.

I was given a stable and secure environment with a community organisation to grow and blossom in, after two placements that were not acceptable. My current placement has proven to be a strong, long-term placement, which I have been in for the past year and four months. In this placement, my rights have been respected every day.

My caregiver (or, as I call her, my “Aunty”) and I have a strong and stable relationship in which I feel safe. I can talk to her about anything that troubles me and not be afraid or stressed about expressing myself to her.

These key things have made me who I am today – a positive, strong and resilient young woman! In general, I feel an awesome amount of gratitude towards those who have influenced and encouraged my resilience!

With every young person you support to become resilient, the stronger our society will be. The Youth Council wants you to know that in order for young people to “bounce back” and blossom we need attention, boundaries in which we feel safe and secure, and relationships – people who care about us and treat us like any other child.

Young people need positive attention, free of judgements, and time, *your* time. This gives us the freedom to express ourselves without being treated differently just because we are in care.

This interaction can be encouraged from inside a young person’s placements, starting with our relationship with our caregiver. If caregivers give young people in care clear,

positive and reasonable boundaries, they will feel more secure to develop and grow, and they will also be less likely to end up in abusive or unhealthy relationships.

A strong, positive relationship between a caregiver and a young person encourages a mutual respect. A respected and appreciated young person is more likely to respect and value others.

Young people are much like blossoms. We have certain needs in order to live, grow and reach our potential. Without attention, boundaries and relationships a young person's resilience may not develop. If a young person is not given attention and boundaries within a positive stable relationship, they may not be able to thrive and grow.

However, like all young people – whether they are in care or not – if they are valued, loved, given attention, supported and cared for, they can become resilient young people. And everyone here can be a part of that.

STABILITY (JANE)

Hello, my name is Jane. I am five years old. My mummy said that I am going to live with another lady. I feel all right – I do not really know what is going on.

Hi, my name is Jane. I am eight years old. I have lived in six different homes over the last three years. I feel sad and lonely. First, my Mum did not want me, then all my foster parents did not want me either. Why doesn't anyone love me enough to keep me? Where is my home? Where do I belong?

Hi, my name is Jane. I am 17 years old. I have been living with the same family for almost 10 years now. I ended up in a loving supportive family. That environment has directly helped me to blossom into the confident, happy young woman before you.

But I was one of the lucky ones. For every young person like me, how many others have slipped through the cracks? How many other young people have been moved around from place to place, up-ended physically and emotionally, until any chance for them to blossom has withered away?

At our last Youth Council meeting, we tallied the number of placements that the 11 of us present had received. In total, we had 170 placements. That is about *15 placements* per person. This is not good enough.

There are those of you, however, that do have the power to prevent this situation occurring. I am asking you please to exercise this power.

Without stability, without feelings of security and love, young people can never reach their full potential – they cannot blossom.

The Department of Child, Youth and Family Services needs to work hard to find stable, long-term homes for children and young people, and to ensure that caregivers provide not just the physical necessities of life, but the emotional necessities too.

I want to thank you, CYF, for placing me in such a supportive home. Without it, who knows where I would be now? Please give as many young people as you can the chance to blossom like I have. They deserve it.

CONCLUSION (RENEE)

Please remember that we represent all young people in care.

- We are young people, not a caseload. We need you to see past stereotypical ideas of young people in care. We need you to get to know us as the unique young people that we are, and tailor your work around our individual needs, wishes, dreams and goals.
- We need you to know our rights and give us up-to-date information about our rights.
- We need your time, your energy, your nurturing. If you see us and treat us as the forming potential that we truly are, then we are more likely to blossom.
- Lastly, we need stability. If we have all of the above but do not feel as though we belong anywhere, and cannot establish roots, then our growth and development will be stunted.

Children and young people in care need your help. Do not take your guardianship of us lightly – see it rather as being more like a parent to us, the way you would raise your own children.

Please learn from our good experiences and use our bad experiences as a guide to the things that you and others in your position can change.

Finally, thank you and congratulations to those of you who have helped us to flourish, to blossom and to grow.