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## **Promoting resilience amongst young people transitioning from care to independent living: Experiences of residential social care workers**

Linda Cameron, Anne Hynes, Yvonne Maycock, Eillen O’Neill, and Ann Marie O’Reilly

The capacity for a young adult to develop and overcome obstacles in life underpins the concept of resilience building (Gilligan, 1997). A key role of the social care worker is to ensure that young adults growing up in the care system are afforded the best possible outcomes. This includes social care workers helping young people build their resilience in preparation for the transition into independent living and aftercare. The research reported here examines the experiences and perspectives of two residential social care workers regarding the promotion of resilience amongst young people transitioning from residential care to independent living. From analysis of the data collected, three themes were identified: the importance of a secure base, maintaining consistent and long-term relationships and challenges faced by social care workers in building the resilience of care leavers. Findings concur with previous research, which identified the importance of young people having a secure base in their lives as well as long-term relationships as a source of support to aid them in their transition from care to independence. This research in exploring some of the challenges of helping build the resilience of care leavers highlights the possible value of allowing young people to engage in positive risk taking opportunities in order to build important life skills for independent living.

### **Introduction**

Resilience can be identified as the development of the socio-emotional qualities “which cushion a vulnerable child from the worst effects of adversity in whatever form it takes, and which may help a child or young person to cope, survive and even thrive in the face of great hurt and disadvantage” (Gilligan, 1997, p.12). It involves being exposed to major threat and then adapting in a positive way (Guest, 2012). Research on the concept of resilience and care leavers identifies the importance of the preparation of young people leaving care in order to succeed in adulthood (Daniel, 2005; Schofield & Beek, 2009; Guest, 2012; Driscoll, 2013). However research undertaken by Kelleher, Kelleher, and Corbett (2000, p.119), which investigated the outcomes of children leaving state care in Ireland, found that 33 percent of care leavers become homeless immediately after leaving care and within two years 66 percent are homeless.

Tarren-Sweeney (2008) discusses the cumulative effects experienced by young people leaving care, in particular vulnerability and disadvantage leading them to “represent one of the most vulnerable and disadvantaged groups in Western society” (p. 345). While literature identifies the importance of support for all young people transitioning to adulthood, this is often challenging for

care leavers transitioning to independent living as they often do not have the support systems to fall back on when living alone (Schofield & Beek, 2009; Akister, Owens & Goodyear 2010).

### **The Role of the Social Care Practitioner in Promoting Resilience**

Within the residential care system in Ireland the social care worker's role is to act in loco parentis, thus they are responsible for the everyday care of the child or young adult. The expectation is that social care workers afford young people the best possible outcomes, acting to maintain the young adult's best interests and to meet their developmental needs. The social care worker is required to take on this role in the absence of biological parents and as agents for the State. To that end, social care workers engage in regular assessments with the young person in order to meet important needs in key areas of the young person's life such as health, education, life skills, friendship and relationships. Schofield and Beek (2009, p.257) point out that young people in care require reliable caregivers who provide emotional and practical support to help young people develop confidence "in tackling new challenges in learning, in work and relationships".

The social care worker also plays a key role in preparing the young person for the transition from care to independent living. Driscoll (2013, p.141), in a study of care leavers in the United Kingdom, suggests that "where a relationship of trust and care is established, participants were willing to accept support", and that young people in care require a "supportive relationship with at least one competent adult". This research focuses on the experiences and perspectives of social care workers in attempting to support and build the resilience of young people through the leaving care process.

### **Research Design**

This study was exploratory in nature and thus adopted a qualitative approach to research the social care workers' experiences of resilience and capacity building with young people leaving the care system. Semi-structured interviews were used to explore the participants' experiences of supporting young people leaving care. Two residential social care workers, who had five and ten years' experience in residential childcare respectively, were interviewed individually. The participants were white Irish, females and were recruited from within the research workshop. The audio-recorded interviews took place in a safe and secure interview room in the venue in which the research workshop was being undertaken.

### *Ethics*

As the participants were members of the research group, they were fully aware of what their participation entailed. The participants were informed that their names would be replaced with pseudonyms for anonymity purposes, however they were also told they might be potentially identifiable as their names would appear on the article produced. Participants were also informed that the audio recordings of the interviews would be deleted post data analysis, as was the case.

### *Data analysis*

The researchers from the group listened to the audio recordings several times and noted common themes relevant to the research question of what factors influence how social care workers support and build the resilience of young people transitioning from residential care to independent living?. Relevant quotes were noted verbatim and are reported in the findings below.

### **Findings and Discussion**

Following the analysis of the data, three themes were identified with regard to the research question outlined above.

#### *The secure base*

Participants in this study identified that the age at which children entered care was crucial as the longer the experience of a secure base that the young person has prior to being received into care, the better the outcomes for that young person. The participants highlighted that young people with more skills of resilience were those who experienced a more secure base prior to admission into statutory care. The young people, who continued to maintain familial links following admission into the care system, were also more able to ask for help from their carers in order have their needs met. In contrast, the participants explained that young people, who had not experienced a secure base and higher numbers of placement moves often, demonstrated signs of aggressive and challenging behaviours when asking for help. This was associated with and related to coping mechanisms, stemming from the rejection of and from others, such as expulsion from education, non-family placements and peer groups:

As the young person has been rejected from family and has never dealt with this [...] they then reject education...and the residential placement as it is the only way they know and the young person has control (Agnes).

This finding agrees with those of Daniel (2005) and Schofield and Beek (2009), which identify having a secure base as a key factor influencing the building of the resilience and capacity of young people leaving care. Young people who have experienced a secure base seem to be better equipped with the skills to access supports from carers in order to aid their transition to independent living.

### ***Stable and consistent relationships***

When participants were asked about the importance of building the resilience of care leavers, they consistently spoke about the importance of stable relationships and friendships maintained over time. Participants expressed the importance of maintaining existing relationships in creating resilience, and the ability to maintain meaningful relationships as a long-term objective:

They get a huge amount of resources from friendships. (Grainne)

Building relationships and knowing their needs...their care plan, and where they are going next is key to helping them move on. Keyworking relationships are also important as the keyworker advocates on their (young person) behalf as well as providing a practical sense of what will be expected of them when they leave care. (Agnes)

This is consistent with research conducted by Iwaniec, Larkin and Higgins (2006, p. 74) which identifies that “supportive attachments, not disrupted ones, are protective factors that can enhance resilience”, while long term relationships have also been associated with longer term benefits in helping care leavers transition into adulthood (Schofield & Beek, 2009).

### ***Challenges of promoting resiliency in young people leaving care***

Participants in this study stressed that some young people feel too independent and think they can do everything for themselves, subsequently they do not ask for the help they need, although they still need ongoing support. It is therefore crucial to instil in young people leaving care a certain set of life skills in order for them to “identify where and how they can get support before a crisis. The relationship with an advocate is essential to promote helping to build resilience and getting a sense of achievement...in baby steps” (Grainne).

Participants also identified the lack of positive risk taking experiences for young people in care as being a challenge to building the problem solving skills of young people leaving care, often due to a model of care intentionally seeking to eliminate risk taking behaviour:

Risk factors are minimised when children and young people come into care so they do not get a chance to learn how to manage everyday life issues like paying bills or having house keys. Then support lessens as they get older as the expectation is that they have to live independently but they are not ready. (Agnes)

Participants reported that positive risk taking behaviour can promote resilience and may help the young person to learn resilience skills before leaving care. Facing and taking risks are something young people need to experience in a supported way for themselves before leaving care.

Participants also identified that risk taking behaviour needs to be experienced and should be explored, alongside coping strategies while being supported by the social care worker. This helps instil self-confidence and social responsibility in the young person leaving the care system.

In conclusion, this small-scale research piece explored the perspectives of two residential social care workers on the factors that influence the building of resilience in young people transitioning from care to independent living. The findings agree with those found in previous research that identifies the importance of a secure base and long-term consistent relationships for young people as key factors in helping them transition from care with positive outcomes. The findings also indicate the importance of young people in care having opportunities to engage in positive risk taking behaviour in order to help them build self-esteem and develop problem-solving skills to aid them once they have left the care system where the necessary supports may no longer be available.

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