



Vulnerable/looked after children

Improving educational outcomes for looked after children and young people (LACYF)

Key messages

- A high proportion of children and young people see their entry into care as beneficial in relation to their education.
- This does not mean all care placements are helpful and the evidence suggests there is considerable unevenness in practice.
- National, regional and local policy has resulted in an improved awareness and understanding of the need to prioritise the educational experiences and achievements of looked after children and young people.
- There is growing evidence that new initiatives such as virtual school heads, personal education plans (PEPs) and designated teachers are having a positive effect on the experiences of looked after children and young people.
- The educational achievement of looked after children and young people interacts with many other elements of the care and educational systems. Improving educational outcomes will be linked with overall improvements in the quality of care that is delivered.
- Improving educational outcomes will include attention to all stages of a child's educational career, from early years through to support for further and higher education.
- There is a serious lack of evidence about the complex learning and behavioural needs of many looked after young people and the ways in which they do or do not benefit from recent policy and other initiatives.
- Measurement of educational outcomes of the looked after group is complex, and improvements on the ground may not be reflected in local authority returns.
- There is evidence of many creative and useful initiatives at all levels of regional and local authority practice which are valued by those who use services.

This review tells us what works in improving educational outcomes for looked after children and young people (LACYP), on the basis of a systematic review of the research literature and analysis of key data. It aims to provide evidence that will help service providers to improve services, and ultimately outcomes, for children, young people and their families.

The review was carried out by the University of Bedfordshire on behalf of the Centre for Excellence and Outcomes in Children and Young People's Services (C4EO). The data analysis was conducted by the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER).

Who are the key people with important knowledge and views working to improve services?

- looked after children and young people
- foster, kinship and residential carers, kinship carers
- education based staff; including teachers in different kinds of schools, tutors and designated teachers, pastoral support staff and SENCOs
- virtual school heads (VSHs)
- looked after children education services or teams (LACES)
- social workers
- specialist front-line professionals
- policy makers

Looked after children and young people are those whose educational experience and achievement is directly affected by the nature and quality of current policy and practice. The research confirms the value that young people attach to consistent educational support, ideally from a stable placement, for their education. They are especially concerned about the way in which information about them is shared.

Foster, residential and kinship carers provide the day-to-day care and support required by looked after children and young people in order for them to attend and achieve their potential at school. Evidence about their experience is more limited, but continues to emphasise their need for comprehensive information about education at the time of placement, and access to appropriate expertise and support should problems emerge. Their contribution also needs to be viewed in the context of what is known more widely about good practice in supporting placements.

Managers, including virtual school heads manage and coordinate policy and practice relating to the education of looked after children and young people. Evidence suggests considerable progress has been made in this area. Monitoring of looked after children's education, together with better communication and co-ordination of practice between professionals, helps ensure that young people do not become 'lost' to the system and local trends can be identified.

Looked after children education services or teams have played an increasingly important role in providing direct services such as tutoring, collecting data and providing advice and training to other front-line professionals such as designated teachers. These teams appear to work well and have a positive impact on the educational progress of looked after children and young people. More systematic evaluation of their work would be beneficial.

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Social workers co-ordinate care planning for looked after children and young people, which includes personal education plans (PEPs). This is a key role, and carers report that the input of social workers in liaising with other professionals can be extremely valuable. On the other hand, shortages and changes of social worker is a frequent complaint and can result in social workers becoming somewhat marginal to the educational experience of looked after children and their carers.

Specialist front-line professionals may be involved in a number of ways in providing education support or access to additional educational opportunities, including music, sport and arts-based activities. These activities have flourished in recent years

and are viewed very positively by young people and their carers.

Birth parents and families continue to have an important role in the lives of looked after children and young people, including their education. Unfortunately we have little information about how this works out in practice.

Policy makers in government departments are engaged in introducing new policy and implementing and reviewing the effectiveness of existing policy. Their role has been crucial in heightening awareness of the educational needs of children and young people in care and in creating an infrastructure through which these needs can be met.

Is there specific data available to inform the way forward?

The quality of national data on the placements, care careers and some educational outcomes relating to looked after children and young people has improved and makes an important contribution. However, this data does not capture the more complex processes involved in working with looked after children and young people, and the many different ways in which policy and practice is impacting on their educational experience and outcomes. Published research at local, regional and national level is critical to providing a more comprehensive picture.

The evidence base

The research base relating to the education of looked after children and young people has increased considerably over the past decade. The quality of national data concerning looked after children’s educational placements and outcomes has improved and there is a growing body of information regarding the impact of national and regional initiatives. However, there are weaknesses and there is a need for:

- more discussion of theoretical and conceptual frameworks
- more cross-disciplinary research
- more research involving schools and addressing learning processes
- more research that differentiates the educational experience of different groups of looked after young people, and examines the effects of gender, ethnicity and disability
- research that examines the impact of specific interventions designed to improve educational outcomes for looked after young people
- research designs that involve a wider range of methodologies.

Next steps

An updated version of this review is due to be published in Autumn 2010. This will include good practice examples and views from children, young people, parents, carers and service providers.

C4EO reviews on improving the educational outcomes of LACYP and the number of care leavers in 'settled, safe accommodation' are also available on the C4EO website. Local decision-makers and commissioners working in local authorities and Children's Trusts may also find it helpful to read the Vulnerable children directors' summary, which presents the key messages from all three reviews
www.c4eo.org.uk/themes/vulnerablechildren

C4EO is using the main messages from the three Vulnerable children reviews to underpin its knowledge sharing and capacity building work with Children's Trusts, and through them the full range of professions and agencies working with looked after children and their families.

Research summaries

This summary is a concise and accessible overview of the key messages from the research review on this topic.

Please go to www.c4eo.org.uk to download full and in-depth versions.

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