

JUST SIX
QUESTIONS

RESEARCH
SUMMARY



Investing in the Relationship: Practitioners' Relationships with Looked-After Children and Care Leavers in Social Work Practices.

Key Details

KEY WORDS

Care leavers, evaluation, looked-after children, recognition theory, relationships, Social Work Practice

POPULATION GROUP

Youth in and leaving care

STEPPING UP THEMES

Strong, Supportive Friends & Families

RESEARCH ORIGIN

International

SOURCE

Academic Article (peer reviewed)

[Youth in care] and “care leavers want social work practitioners to listen to them and take them seriously. Research commonly reports that they want practitioners to be reliable; to take action on things concerning young people and advocate for them; to focus on what is good for them and to take a genuine interest in them; to respect confidences; to treat them as individuals; and to involve them in decisions.”

1. What is the research about?

In order to improve outcome for youth in and leaving care, there has been a policy shift in the UK to allow case workers to focus more time on building relationships with youth rather than on administrative tasks. While relationships have been identified as central to the wellbeing of youth in care, research continues to report challenges in nurturing youth-care worker relationships in practice. This research attempts to uncover how youth worker practitioners can build better relationships with youth in and leaving care in order to improve outcomes.

2. Where did the research take place?

This research took place in Preston England, United Kingdom.

3. Who is this research about?

Sixty-five percent of respondents were youth in care and thirty-five percent were youth leaving care. Fifty-five percent of the youth were male and forty-five percent were female. The researchers intentionally selected youth with disabilities and who were from minority ethnic groups. Participants were between the ages of 7-23 years old and had been in care for more than 2 years.

4. How was the research done?

A matched control design using a mixed research methods approach was used to evaluate the processes and outcomes of a pilot project intended to improve relationships between child and youth case workers, and youth in and leaving care. Qualitative and quantitative data was collected over three years from five pilot sites. The focus of this article is on the 169 interviews with youth in and leaving care that were recorded, transcribed and coded using a thematic analysis. Participants were purposively sampled based on length of time in care, number of placement moves, and placement type.

5. What are the key findings?

Overall, the research suggests that increasing case workers' direct contact with youth increases the opportunities for quality relationships to develop. Continuity of care was an important factor and quality of care was sometimes linked with the length of time they knew their case worker. However, if the relationship was not positive, the length of relationship was sometimes noted as detrimental.

Overwhelmingly, youth in care and youth leaving care in the pilot project were satisfied with their relationship with their case worker and identified three characteristics of a quality relationship: love, rights and social esteem. In this study, 'love' meant that they youth perceived their case worker as a friend and an equal; 'rights' referred to case workers delivering on tasks they had committed to; and 'social esteem' meant they felt valued and listened to.

6. Why does this research matter for youth work?

While many youth workers acknowledge that relationships are the key to promoting positive outcomes for youth, how to establish quality relationships often remains unclear. The findings in this study can provide youth workers with a framework for exploring different elements of quality relationships. This research suggests a focus on developing love, rights, and self-esteem in the youth.

Relationship-based practice is critical for youth whose lives are more unsettled and chaotic. For the youth in this study, having case workers who made efforts on their behalf and who listened to their concerns as individuals resulted in the establishment of high quality relationships.

These findings can promote organizational change and help spur new models of service delivery that allow for more time to be spent in direct work with youth and families. Additionally, this study can encourage youth case workers to prioritize building their relationship with the youth they work with over administrative work in order to improve youth outcomes.



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