

## LOOKED AFTER CHILDREN AND THEIR CARERS

The well-being of children in care can present particular difficulties, as a significant number of children come from deprived and disadvantaged backgrounds compounded by neglect, maltreatment and domestic violence. This exemplar will increase the knowledge, skills and understanding of practitioners when working with looked after children and their families.

### 1. What does the evidence tell us?

Children who are in public care in the UK typically achieve lower educational standards than their peers who are not in public care (Fernandez 2008). Children's psychological needs are particularly relevant to the educational context, as they impact on educational achievement and engagement with schooling. Among the factors related to looked-after children's lower educational achievement are low educational attainment, poor attendance, overrepresentation in school exclusion, suspension, frequent school changes as a consequence of placement breakdown, low completion rates and high unemployment among those who age out of the system.

Research suggests that one of the factors needed in order for a child in care to succeed academically is a supportive home environment that encourages studying (Osborne et al 2010). This can be made difficult by limited contact between the key adults involved in supporting education of looked after children (e.g. carers, teachers, and social workers). Therefore, all carers should be encouraged to take a direct role in supporting their child's education (Osborne et al 2010).

Teachers and carers need to focus on looked after children within a framework of high expectations and good teaching and learning for all students (Ofsted 2008). Support for looked after children should be rooted in good practice for all children (Ofsted 2008). One strand of a longitudinal study in Australia found that looked after children want an adult to take interest and encourage them to do well in their school work (Fernandez 2008). A review of 11 interventions aimed at improving the educational attainment of looked after children concluded that if provided with adequate support, they seem to be able to improve in school (Forsman and Vinnerljung 2012).

A strong home-school partnership is critical to narrowing the attainment gap for looked after children, and this partnership must often include the state as the corporate parent too (Wigley 2011; Fernandez 2008). Because looked after children's lives often lack stability, carers, educators, and any agency workers must all work together strategically to support their learning (Zetlin et al 2010). Additionally, when a pupil's experience of learning is positive, the school environment and the educational process can offer structure, boundaries and security to looked after children (Wigley 2011; Zetlin et al 2010).

The development of structures and organisation that will help to identify any problems hindering school success for looked after children at early stages is

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needed (Zetlin 2010). The use of some form of data-tracking system between carers, educators, and agencies can facilitate strategic communication.

Caregivers often seek outside help to address the children's learning, social, emotional, and behavioural needs (Zetlin et al 2010). Looked after children may need more intensive support, and inter-related service delivery, co-ordinated strategy, and integrated responses to looked after children's psychological and educational needs should be implemented and practiced (Fernandez 2008)

### 2. What seems to be working?

The recognition that caregivers are an important source for improving educational outcomes for looked after children (Cheung et al 2012; Flynn et al 2012). Caregiver engagement, particularly in the home setting, predicted greater probabilities of academic success for youth in care (Cheung et al 2012). Higher educational aspirations on the part of the of the caregivers were associated with better outcomes, and caregiver involvement in a greater number of school activities predicted significant improvement in the youth's average marks (Flynn et al 2012).

Continuous and regular communications and multiple opportunities for self-evaluation and sharing of ideas (Ofsted 2008). Looked after children's carers value being involved in the pupil's learning plan, receiving written communications regularly, and advice about how to support learning in the care facility or home (Ofsted 2008).

Close monitoring and communication of academic, social and emotional progress from an early stage (Ofsted 2008). Parents and carers appreciated being involved in the pupil's learning and development, and a sense of trust was instilled when schools took time to discuss issues when they arose instead of waiting until the possibility of harsher disciplinary measures were needed (Ofsted 2008).

Delivering support and services for looked after children in a low profile manner (Ofsted 2008). Schools need to employ flexibility and make some allowances for the effects of a history of traumatic events without making looked after children feel marginalised (Wigley 2011).

Projects which provide materials to support and develop learning demonstrate improvement in looked after children's attitudes towards learning as well as their actual attainment (Griffiths 2012). The Letterbox Club project in England sent parcels of literacy materials directly to the where looked after children were staying, not only to encourage learning with their carers but to also focus their energy on engaging with and owning educational materials (Dymoke and Griffiths 2010).

### 3. What is the impact?

The Letterbox Club, which sends literacy materials (e.g. books, stationary, and maths games) to looked-after children every 6 weeks with the aim of engaging

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carers, demonstrated a significant improvement in reading and maths ability (Osborne 2010; Griffiths et al 2010). For example, at the end of the programme, the maths test results were converted into National Curriculum levels for each child; for two years running, the percentage of intervention pupils increasing their National Curriculum level score by at least one level equalled or surpassed the average rate of their non-looked after peers (Griffiths et al 2010).

An English paired reading literacy programme for looked-after children and their foster carers that required weekly liaising between teachers and foster carers demonstrated an average improvement of each child making a year's progress in just over four months (Osborne 2010). Additionally, the average amount of progress made for each month the child participated in the intervention resulted in a reading age increase by just shy of three months (Osborne 2010).

Literacy interventions' impact may extend beyond literacy skills alone – there were reported increases in the children's confidence and interest in reading (Osborne 2010; Griffiths 2012). Not only do children get to spend one-on-one time with their carer, but reportedly the interventions also facilitated partnership working, building trust and confidence in the relationship between carers, teachers, and social workers (Osborne 2010; Dymoke and Griffiths 2010).

### CASE STUDY

An English literacy intervention aimed at improving foster children's education and their carers' engagement in their learning used a paired reading approach. Training workshops for foster carers, school staff and social workers were undertaken to address the use and delivery of paired reading. Over a 16 week period, 35 carers and children read together several times a week, the average being 3 times. Schools liaised with carers on a weekly basis to discuss progress and issues.

At each weekly meeting between the school staff and carers, monitoring forms were completed. For each pupil schools collected baseline measures of reading age using the Salford test, and again immediately after the completion of the intervention.

The results of the paired reading study were encouraging and demonstrated a marked increase in the reading age of the looked after children who participated. On average, reading age improved by 3 months during each month in the project – meaning that over the 4 months of the intervention, each child made an average of one year's progress.

Findings also suggested positive impact beyond literacy skills. Feedback from carers suggested that for many of the looked after children, their confidence and enthusiasm for reading increased, as well as an improvement in the relationship between carer and child (Osborne et al 2010).

Using these reflective questions will support you to consider your own approach to engaging and supporting children and their families:

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- Do we begin any specific targeting for parental engagement from day one of (primary, secondary) school or do we wait until there appears to be a problem or struggle with the student's achievements?
- How effectively do we use current available data about levels of poverty in our community to help us target our interventions?
- How effectively do you encourage parents to support their child's learning in literacy? In what ways could this be developed further?
- How effectively do you encourage parents to support their child's learning in numeracy? In what ways could this be developed further?
- To what extent do staff understand GIRFEC, the wellbeing indicators and how these can have a positive impact on children and families?
- How effectively do we monitor programmes?
- What evidence do we have that family learning is improving the life chances of the families involved?
- Are outcomes for children improving as a result of their participation in family learning? How do we know?

Documents: -

### **How Good is Our Third Sector (2015)**

<https://education.gov.scot/improvement/Pages/frwk3hgiothirdsector.aspx>

### **How Good is Our Schools 4 (2015)**

<https://education.gov.scot/improvement/Pages/frwk2hgios.aspx>

### **How good is the learning and development in our community? (2016)**

<https://education.gov.scot/improvement/Pages/frwk4hgiocommunitylearning.aspx>

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