

9 Successful and supported transitions from out-of-home care

“Talking to the people from Centrelink was very interesting. I didn’t know they had their own terms for some things. It’s no wonder I couldn’t get information on what I wanted – I wasn’t speaking their language.”⁷⁸

Chapter 9 key messages:

- Entering adulthood is more challenging for young people in out-of-home care than it is for other young people.
- Approximately 13% of young people (9–17 years) and 6% of children (5–8 years) who responded to the Child Guardian Survey indicated that they had been reunited with their family more than once.
- In 2006, Community Visitors reported two examples of young people feeling uncomfortable with their transitions from out-of-home care into adulthood and the Department of Child Safety responded appropriately to these concerns.

Children and young people in out-of-home care will transition from out-of-home care in two ways:

- children and young people are no longer in need of protection by the Department of Child Safety and return to their families; this return to home should only occur once risk factors of abuse and neglect have been removed from the family, or
- young people turn 18 and are no longer the responsibility of the state. Leaving out-of-home care because of adulthood is a major life event which involves transitioning from dependence on state accommodation and supports to self-sufficiency.⁷⁹ The Child Guardian believes that the child safety system should prepare and support young people to make the transition to self-sufficiency just as a good parent would for their own child. This can be a challenging task because of the complex issues that care leavers face, including the fact that they may:⁸⁰
 - still be recovering from abuse suffered before entering care
 - be experiencing ongoing social and emotional disturbances as a result of separation from biological families
 - have had fewer social and educational opportunities because of the inadequacies of care, and
 - have few family and community networks to call on for support.

These factors can contribute to poor outcomes for those leaving out-of-home care. Poor outcomes include significant health, social and educational deficits such as homelessness, involvement in crime and prostitution, mental and physical health problems, poor educational and employment outcomes, inadequate social support systems and early parenthood.⁸¹

78 A young person describing how a peer mentoring program which involved meeting service providers such as Centrelink helped her transition from out-of-home care, as quoted at page 4 of ‘Peer mentors as partners in the leaving care process: evaluation of a Western Australian initiative’, presented at the 7th Australian Institute of Family Studies Conference, ‘Family Futures: Issues in research and policy’, 2000.

79 P Medes and B Moslehuddin, ‘From dependence to interdependence: towards better outcomes for young people leaving state care’, *Child Abuse Review*, vol. 15, 2006, pp.110–26.

80 Ibid.

81 Ibid.

9.1 The Child Guardian Survey

The Child Guardian Survey asked children and young people whether they had returned to live with their parents and, if so, the number of times this had occurred. The mean scores for young people and children indicated that most had not been returned home, as the average number of reunifications for young people and children was 0.69 and 0.46 respectively. Approximately 13% of young people and 6% of children had been reunited with their families more than once. Two children reported being placed home 20 times and one young person reported being placed back 15 times.

Young people aged 16–18 years were asked if they had a leaving care plan and whether they were involved in developing it; 36.8% of young people responded that they did not have a leaving care plan and an additional 45.3% responded that they did not know whether they had a leaving care plan. Of the young people who responded that they had a leaving care plan, approximately half were involved in its development.

9.2 Action on behalf of individual children and young people

9.2.1 Community Visitor service to a young person, 'Duncan'

During a visit to a residential facility in 2006 a Community Visitor became aware that a young person ('Duncan') who was 16 years and 6 months old was being moved to another placement without a leaving care plan to support him.

The Child Guardian advised the Department of Child Safety about the apparent lack of an appropriate transition plan. In response, the Department of Child Safety advised that, although Duncan had been moved to another residential program without a transition plan, one was developed several months later (by the young person's 17th birthday), which included:

- weekly counselling
- the development of basic living skills
- the development and enhancement of family relationships
- residence in a co-tenanted supported accommodation service for three more months
- the continued attendance of Duncan at high school so that he could complete

senior education before further education or employment, and

- the exploration of accommodation services with regard to future independent living, including:
 - the Community Rent Scheme
 - Youth Supported Assistance Accommodation, and
 - shared accommodation in the private rental market.

9.2.2 Community Visitor service to a young person, 'Fran'

A young person ('Fran') who was 16 years and 6 months old told a Community Visitor during a visit to a residential facility in 2006 that she was going to be transitioned to an independent living unit and that she did not feel that she was ready for this move. Fran said that she felt this way because she had trialled a three-day stay at the independent living unit and this was not successful from her point of view. In addition, Fran said that they were having difficulty contacting the Department of Child Safety to discuss these issues.

The Department of Child Safety advised that, three days after receiving this information from the Child Guardian, a Child Safety Officer met with Fran to discuss her independent living concerns. This was followed up several months later with Fran being transitioned to a family-based placement rather than independent living.

9.3 Future Child Guardian work on transitions from out-of-home care

In relation transitions from out-of-home care, the Department of Child Safety has advised a review is being undertaken of current legislation, policies and practices on reunification and child protection practice. The review seeks to protect children from further harm through changes to Department of Child Safety policy and practice to reduce risk when a child is reunifying with their parents. The changes will be informed by international and national research into parental substance misuse and the impact on the safety and well-being of children, and will be supported by, and consistent with, a national approach to the issue of reunification and its place in child protection practice.

From mid-2007 the Child Guardian intends to start measuring the following Child Guardian Key

Outcome Indicators in relation to transitions from out-of-home care:

- the proportion of young people aged 15 years and over who have a leaving care plan
- the proportion of children and young people who are in out-of-home care and who are safely reunited with their parents
- the proportion of children and young people who exited out-of-home care:
 - who are renotified within 12 months of the initial notification, and
 - who are resubstantiated within 12 months of the initial substantiation
- the proportion of young people in the youth justice system/adult correctional system with a child protection history, and
- the number and proportion of issues/complaints related to transition from out-of-home care that are substantiated by the Child Guardian, which includes investigations, reviews, monitoring and visits to children and young people in out-of-home care.

In addition to the above, the Child Guardian will conduct work, at both the individual and the system level, on transitions from out-of-home care for children and young people, and these activities will be detailed in the *Child Guardian Report 2007*.