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Disability Research Unit, University of Leeds

Project News

Whatever Next?

YOUNG DISABLED PEOPLE LEAVING CARE

This is the third newsletter from the *Whatever Next?* Project.

We have now met with more than twenty young people between the ages of 14 and 25 and listened to their stories about growing up and leaving care. Most of these people have participated through individual interviews. Many have been able to speak directly to a researcher. Others have relied on a third person (such as a parent or key worker) to help convey their views.

In this newsletter, we summarise some of the key findings so far, and raise more questions about services for disabled care leavers.

In this issue

- Finding suitable placements
- Gaps in service provision
- Access to information
- Identity and transition

Read more about it...

The following articles by members of the project team provide more information and examples.

- Mark Priestley 'Left out in the cold', *Community Care*, 11-17 November 1999, p. 29
- Parvaneh Rabiee 'Mind the gap', *Community Care*, 8-14 June 2000, p. 29
- Julie Knowles 'Whatever Next?', *Key Notes*, June 2000

If you would like to know more about these issues or if you would like to talk to one of the project team please contact us.

Finding suitable placements

Young disabled people may find it harder to access suitable placements when they are 'looked after'. Accommodation and family placement systems may fail to respond to the specific needs of disabled children. Lack of resources means that the range of available placements is often vacancy-led rather than needs-led. Under pressure, care managers choose from an unsuitable range of options, rather than questioning the sort of care they provide.

For example, one young woman whose fostering placement broke down was placed in an isolated flat during her teenage years, with few social contacts, until she could be transferred to adult services. For others, transition has meant an abrupt transfer to adult care units, without adequate needs assessment or pathway planning. For those who wait, sometimes for a very long time, for suitable accommodation, 'respite care' units may be used as full-time residential accommodations. This means not only that the needs of the young person are not being met, but also that already restricted resources are used inappropriately.

Q. Do you have other examples of unsuitable placements?

Gaps in service provision

The experiences of the people we have met suggest that there are some important gaps in service provision for young disabled people who are looked after.

In particular, there are a large number of care leavers with 'mild' or 'moderate' learning difficulties who seem to fall through the gap between children's services and disability services. As a consequence, they are sometimes denied the rights and choices available to others, for example in housing and educational opportunities. Part of the problem is that purchasers still tend to buy from existing services, which are not geared towards individual needs. The result is that young people with learning difficulties are either institutionalised in residential or day centre settings, expected to fail the independence test, or left to live independently, expected to achieve in a mainstream setting without adequate support.

Within specialist service provision, there are also very few 'grown up' activities available to young disabled people. Disabled people are often lumped in together as one group when it comes to organising leisure activities. As one mother commented 'there is nothing available and they don't make it available'.

Read more about these issues in *Community Care*, 8-14 June 2000, p. 29

Q. Do you have other examples of gaps in service provision?

Access to information

Many disabled young people and their families experience difficulty in accessing appropriate information, especially at critical points of transition. For example, some parents told us that they received information when a child was younger but much less as they approached adulthood (e.g. financial benefits, housing options, educational opportunities, job training, etc.).

There is also very little guidance for social workers about the options available for disabled young people when they leave care. It is often left to the discretion of individual social workers to decide where to go for more information. This problem is compounded by a lack of communication between services providers. For example, a key worker based in an adult residential unit might know little if anything about options available elsewhere.

The preferred sources of information vary according to the type of information required. Some young people said that their friends were an important source of information, yet this is rarely taken into account in planning services. Others had few opportunities to use other young people as a resource in this way, emphasising the need for concerted effort to increase opportunities for peer contact (for example: group meetings, one to one meetings, telephone contact, written, email or internet contact).

Identity and transition

Growing up is a time of change, and we have also been asking young people what it means to be an adult.

Adulthood is often defined in terms of identity, choices and control over one's life. However, for many young disabled people who have been looked after as children very little changes in their lives as they become adults—except for the transition from children's services to adult services. Some young people's lives seem to be so dominated by service provision that they define their own identity in terms of services—'I'm an adult now because I can't go there anymore' (children's unit).

For those who are fostered, adulthood was more likely to be defined in other ways (e.g. having control over money, travelling alone in a taxi, or going to the pub, etc.).

Adults often have low expectations of what young disabled people can achieve, and this affects self-esteem too.