Improving the mental health of Looked After Young People:
An exploration of mental health stigma
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Introduction

YoungMinds is the UK’s leading charity committed to improving the emotional wellbeing and mental health of children and young people. Mental health stigma is a major barrier to achieving this and therefore tackling stigma is a key area of our work. Our recent survey and evidence review on stigma “See beyond our labels” highlighted the detrimental effect that stigma has on young people in talking about how they feel and accessing support services if they need them.

This report examines the particular perceptions and experiences of mental health stigma amongst Looked After Young People. Around 60% of Looked After Young People have some level of mental health problem (National Institute for health and Clinical Excellence) and in addition are often amongst the most marginalised in our society.

Young people’s participation is a key element of design and delivery of mental health services. The voices and opinions of the Looked After Young People we spoke to in this report will therefore be used to inform policy makers and the professionals who work with them with the aim of improving Looked After Young People’s mental health and wellbeing.

Methods

YoungMinds worked with 50 young people from residential homes, secure settings and foster placements and ran a variety of creative workshops focussing on the areas of placements, education and support services. We also ran two groups for residential child care workers and supervising social workers.

The research used qualitative methodology as creative methods worked most effectively with this group of young people. Participants provided a diverse range of feedback and clearly demonstrated that every young person is different with varying needs, wishes, likes, dislikes, experiences and ideas. However, despite this diversity some clear themes emerged from the workshops.

Key findings

Education

Young people were asked to consider how they were perceived at school. They documented how they thought teachers viewed their behaviour, their relationships with others and their emotional wellbeing. We also asked them to think about whether school was an environment where they felt that they could receive support for their emotional wellbeing and whether their needs were understood.

Findings: Some young people felt they were seen as disruptive at school and their relationship with teachers was seen as negative. Most of the young people stated that they did not feel that their emotional needs were understood or that they could talk about their emotional needs at school, especially because staff did not have experience of the care system. A few said that they felt judged and that they would like to be listened to more. A few said that they liked to keep home and school separate and that they did not want to be singled out because they were Looked After.

All teaching staff should have an understanding of the experiences of Looked After Young People and of the traumatic backgrounds that many of them have come from. They need to assess young people about information sharing in relation to their Personal Education Plans.

Placements

Many Looked After Young People experience a range of placements. Some young people stay in the first placement that they move to, some return home and others may live in multiple placements. Some young people who we spoke to had lived in more than fifteen placements.

We spent time with young people exploring their thoughts and views about expressing their feelings in their placements. We wanted to understand whether they felt that they could talk about their feelings to their carers and whether their placements provided environments where their emotional wellbeing could be supported.

Findings: Many of the young people in foster care and residential care said that they can talk to their current carers about their feelings. However they identified previous placements as less positive and stated that they did not think that their carers understood their needs.

They told us that they were often anxious when they moved into placements and that their perception of foster care and residential care were very different from reality. They worried about moving in with people who they did not know and the importance of visiting a placement first was highlighted as vital. Many were happier in their placements than they had anticipated which suggests that a more comprehensive and structured admissions process would be beneficial.

Young people moving to independence or supported accommodation shared their anxieties about living with less support. They appreciated maintaining contact with their residential homes or participation workers, All foster carers and residential workers should have training and ongoing supervision supporting the mental health needs of Looked After Young People.

Support Services

Looked After Young People come into contact with many services. The Local Authority has a duty to ensure that needs identified in their care plan are being met and these include young people’s mental health needs. We asked young people about their perception of Local Authority Services and mental health services. We wanted to explore whether there were stigma attached to these services. We also asked young people to think about what they would like the support services to be like and asked them to describe their ideal mental health service.

Findings: Many young people had a fairly negative perception of mental health services. Those who had not accessed services were wary and suggested that they were for people who were particularly unwell. Words such as “mad” and “mental” were used to describe who services may be aimed at. Suggestions for improvement centred on building relationships, there was a reluctance of talking to strangers and a fear of what may be discovered if they opened up. Empathy was put on trust and young people identified that they were more likely to talk to adults working in participation services or their carers than workers within CAMHS. Young people stressed that they need time to build relationships with professionals before they access emotional support from them.

Some young people had been involved with CAMHS and there was a general suggestion that those who had received a diagnosis had found it helpful but wished that they had received assessments earlier rather than waiting lengthy periods to get support. Looked After Young People should also be involved in the design and delivery of mental health services.

Conclusion

The research highlighted the detrimental effect that stigma has on young people in talking about how they feel and accessing support services if they need them. This report examined the particular perceptions and experiences of mental health stigma amongst Looked After Young People and in addition are often amongst the most marginalised in our society.

Young people’s participation is a key element of design and delivery of mental health services. The voices and opinions of the Looked After Young People we spoke to in this report will therefore be used to inform policy makers and the professionals who work with them with the aim of improving Looked After Young People’s mental health and wellbeing.

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They told us that they were often anxious when they moved into placements and that their perception of foster care and residential care were very different from reality. They worried about moving in with people who they did not know and the importance of visiting a placement first was highlighted as vital. Many were happier in their placements than they had anticipated which suggests that a more comprehensive and structured admissions process would be beneficial.

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Some young people had been involved with CAMHS and there was a general suggestion that those who had received a diagnosis had found it helpful but wished that they had received assessments earlier rather than waiting lengthy periods to get support. Looked After Young People should also be involved in the design and delivery of mental health services.

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Do you think adults at school understand your needs and experiences?

- No, they do tell you off. To be honest, no. I say I would rather talk to my friends. They were useless. I felt judged, particularly by one member of staff. They didn’t really listen to me. It came better when other adults told them. I feel they don’t really listen to me. It came better when other adults told them.

- Yes, but at times previous opinions go against me. I have no idea which every other student.

- No! They don’t. They try and treat me different from everyone else.

- Not all teachers are aware of my life experiences, only teachers in higher school positions are aware.

- I find it hard, as I believe no one understands unless they were in the same situation, but they do try and understand. Not. They don’t try and treat me different from everyone else.

- They don’t understand my background.

What else could school do to help Looked After Young People?

- More support. Understand and not judge. Trying to be a bit more understanding.

- If staff had been through care system/process themselves this might help. Understand where I’m coming from. Don’t crowd and ‘suffocate’ the young person, but be there if the time arises. Get to know the young person first. Don’t be overly judges. It would help if the teacher actually listened.

- Train teachers to listen to pupils problems. Only people who need to know.

- Do tell that the young person that they are great.

- Stop pulling them out of lessons to complete unnecessary forms like Personal Education Plans.

- All that is important is a regular school teacher relationship like every other child. Stop treating them like aliens and treat them like they are everyone else.

Throughout school I had someone who I could talk to about the things that worried me. They helped me get placed in a residential home when I needed it. Sometimes I only went into school so that I could talk to them. They do work with the residential home so they still help me, even though I am no longer at school.

Could you talk about your feelings at school? What would help with this?

- More support. Understand and not judge. Trying to be a bit more understanding.

- Yes, I could, but I prefer to talk to some rather than others. Having the freedom to talk to who I want to. Not really but I could if I wanted to. I felt judged. Only able to tell a few people. Not really, it felt uncomfortable. It would help if the teacher actually listened.

- Yes, I could talk about my feelings. I never need to, I have a perfect relationship with my carers, so if necessary I talk to them. I could talk about some feelings but felt if anyone else heard them they would judge me. No – because I didn’t like any of the teachers. I wouldn’t have wanted to talk to the teachers in the first place because I didn’t feel I could (because it’s school where you are supposed to get away from home life).
How I’m seen at school

A Personal Education Plan – we asked young people to fill it in as if they were their teacher

Q | Relationship with teachers – How does the young person get on with the teachers?

- Not very well, always disrupting the class • She can behave well for a while when little things can make her flip out and make her go mad • She doesn’t participate much in class • Doesn’t concentrate very well • Sometimes comes out with awkward comments • Doesn’t shut up • Storms off • She usually gets on ok with us staff • Very polite • Always makes good effort • Feel confident enough to talk about school life, bullying and home life • Gets on well with teachers

Q | Relationship with young people – How does the young person get on with other people in the classroom?

- He talks to all class mates • Very aggressive towards other young people • Does not seem to get on well with people his own age • Seems to feel bullied a lot • Everyone has friends and she doesn’t but if she doesn’t like that person she won’t give in to liking them • He gets on well with other class mates • He is popular and gets on with everyone well • She likes talking to her friends, pushes often misses around • He has a close group of friends • He has good relationships with his friends and other people • Generally keeps to himself but often engages with young people appropriately • He has a specific group of friends and he doesn’t display any desire to widen his social group but doesn’t show any problems socially

Q | Behaviour – What is the young person’s behaviour like?

- On and off, sometimes good sometimes bad • Out of class it’s ok • Emails are monitored but it doesn’t affect what he emails • He is well behaved with some minor disruptions • Her behaviour could be better • RE and PSHE troublesome • Some minor disruptions • The behaviour could be better • IE and PSE troubles in some • Disturbs other pupils • He was bad for the first few years but has improved • Absent • Very well behaved sometimes shy • No problem, relatively quiet, no behaviour reports to note • Young person’s behaviour can vary in different lessons • Generally very quiet and alone • Usually behaves

Q | Emotional wellbeing – Do you think the young person is happy?

- She has close friends she can count on • If she has worries or problems she will seek support from her friends • I feel she is happy • He seems happy and content • She does not seem to enjoy time at school • We don’t think he is happy but he tells us he is • Yes he is very happy • Seems happy but other people’s behaviour sometimes affects him • Generally good mood • He seems content, never shows any sign of distress • He seems happy because he is alone most of the time, very difficult to know if the young person is happy because he is alone most of the time, I’d assume the young person wasn’t truly happy.
Young People from Children in Care Councils

Moving Into Care

OUTSIDE: • You have to act strong • You have to show that this doesn’t bother you • It’s almost like you are trying to convince yourself and everyone around you that everything is going to be ok.

INSIDE: • Scared wondering where I am going to live • Asking myself if I will get on with people • Is it acceptable to just go and live in someone else’s house? • Why am I going? • Why isn’t my brother?

In Placement

OUTSIDE: • Angry • Happy • Normal • Positive • Calm

INSIDE: • Scary • Nervous • Sad as I am not seeing my mum, brothers and sisters • Worried • Let down • “Freaked out” • Don’t know where parents are • Happy

Moving Out

OUTSIDE: • Very upset and emotional • I didn’t want to leave my family • Worry about financial struggles • Very excited about the next step in life

INSIDE: • I didn’t want to leave but I knew if I didn’t my relationship with my foster carers would disintegrate • I felt safe as I knew that I still had my foster carers’ support • Very worried about my first night alone • Scared about life alone

HOW I ACT ON THE OUTSIDE

WHAT I FEEL ON THE INSIDE

Young People living in a Secure Setting

Moving Out

INSIDE: • Worried • Lonely • Upset • Anger • Pissed off • Given up • Missing people • Annoyed • Stressed • Bored • No hope • I thought it would be different • I thought I would not be allowed out and be locked in a room • I thought it would be like being in a square box • I thought I would be locked up for 23 hours • Scared • Homesick • Want to run away • Getting in trouble with the police • Fighting • Going to explode

OUTSIDE: • Happy • Grown up • Not caring • Just get on with it • Confident • I know everything • Don’t f### with me • Weren’t bothered • Keep your head down and do your time then you are out • Don’t trust anyone • Messing around • Won’t talk to anyone

HOW I ACT ON THE OUTSIDE

WHAT I FEEL ON THE INSIDE

In Placement

OUTSIDE: • Happy • Grown up • Confident • I know everything • Don’t f### with me • Weren’t bothered • Keep your head down and do your time then you are out • Don’t trust anyone • Messing around • Won’t talk to anyone

OUTSIDE: • See my family and friends and boyfriend • Hyperactive • Excited • Be myself • Don’t have to worry • Gonna have a party • Smile • Yay! • Doing what I want… I’m leaving • What can you do?

OUTSIDE: • You have to act strong • You have to show that this doesn’t bother you • It’s almost like you are trying to convince yourself and everyone around you that everything is going to be ok.

INSIDE: • Scared wondering where I am going to live • Asking myself if I will get on with people • Is it acceptable to just go and live in someone else’s house? • Why am I going? • Why isn’t my brother?

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INSIDE: • OMG I can’t believe it – yay • Jolly • Glad • Pleased • Finally • Going to meet my mates again

INSIDE: • Scary • Nervous • Sad as I am not seeing my mum, brothers and sisters • Worried • Let down • “Freaked out” • Don’t know where parents are • Happy

INSIDE: • I didn’t want to leave but I knew if I didn’t my relationship with my foster carers would disintegrate • I felt safe as I knew that I still had my foster carers’ support • Very worried about my first night alone • Scared about life alone

OUTSIDE: • Very upset and emotional • I didn’t want to leave my family • Worry about financial struggles • Very excited about the next step in life

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What do Young People think of services?

We asked participants what they thought of support services. They considered their perception of social services, social workers, care placements and mental health services. The purpose of this exercise was to explore whether there is stigma attached to these services.

**Support Services**
- Too many people and types of support – I only need one person
- Social workers have to document things about you – they are there to observe you and change things that need to be changed
- Social workers – just want them to disappear
- I have never seen them much at all
- My voice is not heard
- I have had too many social workers
- Foster care was not painted as a place to get help
- I thought that I would be on my own and wouldn’t be able to see my family
- I still sometimes think that it is my fault
- I didn’t think I would have any freedom in residential care
- It took me a long time to tell people that I was in danger in my supported accommodation but in the end I got help
- I thought that I would be beaten up

**Mental Health Services**
- I don’t talk to other people about my problems
- They don’t talk to each other
- They are not really listening and are twisting words
- Why would you want to talk to a stranger?
- People thought I cut myself because I was bored – it wasn’t
- I was being bullied in school
- I struggle to trust CAMHS
- My parents put me in care because they had a negative impression of mental health
- You get labelled
- Better than I thought
- They don’t work
- They don’t listen
- It’s too time consuming for young people
- They give you medication to make you happy or pacify you
- CAMHS: won’t accept 18 yr old which means that accessing support is harder as I have to feel able to go to a doctor and ask for help from adult services
- I don’t talk to other people
- They ask too many questions
- Poor services
- They don’t care – they are just getting paid
- Judgemental
- Make me feel like I’ve got something wrong with me
- I don’t like being in that position
- Not too bothered about seeing her
- I don’t show any emotions
- I think mental health is just about our wellbeing
- I am seeing someone but she is weird
- I know what her role is but can’t remember
- Boring
- Wouldn’t tell my mates, might tell everyone
- Embarrassing
- Useless
- Receiving a diagnosis for Asperger’s Syndrome was

“If I told someone I heard voices or saw things I thought they’d lock me up and I’d end up in a straight-jacket like a prisoner.”

**If 16+ social services – I don’t get the support that I need**
- The staff in my residential home are great
- I can talk to them and they have really helped me
- Some of us attend the Children in Care Council
- We have access to activities and workers who we trust and who make up a team of support staff
- The participation staff really helped me when I was in a very vulnerable housing situation
- I am still not where I want to be but it is better.

“We have participation staff really helped in the Local Authority who are great to talk to
- Much better than foster care
- I wish it hadn’t taken until I was Leaving Care for this to happen
- My participation worker really pushed to get me assessed.”
What do Young People want from Mental Health Services?

- Approachable
  - It would be good if there was a service where people could speak and know that it was 100% anonymous

- Honesty
  - Social workers need to visit more than once in a blue moon and not just visit because there is something wrong or they need to do a pathway plan

- People who actually help and actually care - not just in it for a pay cheque

- Respond more quickly

- Understand the person rather than going on what they read

- Needs to be someone I can trust, someone who understands

- People that have been through what you have

- Needs to be fun, not boring chat about what I’ve done wrong or could do better

- Child centred
  - You should be able to compromise when you want to see them

- Children in care have to wait ages to see a professional in that time mental illness can escalate

- Don’t shy away from what ‘being in care’ means

- Flexible
  - Talk about difficulties

- Not just sitting there writing

- All young people to receive life coaching

- I want to choose who works with me
Young People share their feelings about being in care

That’s my room. I feel safer there.

I always felt supported in my foster home. My foster parents were amazing.

An empty room that has family in it is better than a full room with no family. When I was in one room and they were in another, I always knew they were there.

There are barriers to talking about feelings. Mum is in the kitchen. It made me think of mum’s horrible cooking. I say it’s tasty. I know how much she loves me. I don’t want to say anything horrible.

Throughout the house there are photos of my foster carers’ family. But not of me.

I chose to eat in my room.

In my home in the afternoon. It’s empty and quiet.

The pen represents my move to residential care. They gave me the tools to write; to think and to talk about my feelings. I trust the residential staff. Doors have opened. It’s not like foster care. I am no longer trapped inside my head.

In my foster carer’s room. It’s more or less my room now. My foster carer just comes in to make my bed.

Mum is in the kitchen. It makes me think of mum’s horrible cooking. I say it’s tasty. I know how much she loves me. I don’t want to say anything horrible.

That’s the two parents and the foster parents’ children and that’s me. I don’t want to be different from other children. We couldn’t see my difference. They loved me in the same way.

An empty room that has family in it is better than a full room with no family. When I was in one room and they were in another, I always knew they were there.

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It feels like a hotel. They do everything for me. It’s like a hotel. Not a home.

“There is a case in residential care. I was trapped inside my head. I didn’t talk about how I was feeling. I didn’t trust my carers.”
Adults Working With Young People In Care share their observations

“A young person in their room with a black cloud in a leafless tree hanging over them. The leafless tree represents a feeling of helplessness. The clock represents the young person waiting for time to pass. Behind the clock is the young person’s fantasy of someone knocking on the wall and doors so that they can help and talk things through.”

“Moving in”. He is closed and expressionless and he doesn’t know what to think. Lots of people want to make him feel comfortable and welcome but it might be a little overwhelming. Person on a bed on their own not wanting to be in care. In a perfect world they would have their own place where they can do as they want, just them and their boyfriend.

“What are you going to miss from this placement?” He is worried about who will move him and he is worried about what is left behind. He is looking back at things that he will miss: a child, the dog, the family, his bed. Is he leaving because of something they think he did?

The child imagines. The social worker is behind their desk overloaded with loads of cases. Disarray as his mind is in disarray. "What do I do with this child?" The social worker has their back to the young person, he feels unattainable. There is a wall.

Young boy trapped under the table within a gate surrounded by a wall. The treasure chest with box is full of things he can’t talk about or let go of. Tree full of debris - fears that the world will come crashing down if he decides to talk about his feelings. The gate is open, the socially skilled steps approaching it. Hopefully he will be able to slowly start to talk.
RECOMMENDATIONS

Education

• In order to reduce stigma, young people should have control over who has access to information about them. It is not necessary for all teaching staff to know that a young person is Looked After.
• As part of the admissions “Personal Education Plan” meeting young people should be asked about information sharing. This should be reviewed at the follow up meeting once the young person has begun to develop relationships with school staff.
• In order for Looked After Young People’s mental health to be supported, all staff members must have basic training around the needs and experiences of Looked After Young People so that their emotional needs are supported and they can achieve academically.

Placements

• To improve Looked After Young People’s mental health and wellbeing they need more information before moving into placements. This includes understanding what a foster placement or residential child care or a secure unit might be like.
• Young people must have an opportunity to visit placements prior to moving in and spend time with potential carers.
• All foster carers and residential workers must have training in supporting the mental health needs of young people. This needs to be backed up with regular supervision and reflective support sessions.
• Young people leaving care need to know that they can have support when they move out of their placements as this can be a very anxious time for them and most feel vulnerable and insecure. Young people stated that it was particularly helpful when they continued to have contact with residential workers from the placement where they had previously lived or other adults with whom they already had a positive relationship with.

Mental Health Services

• Young people identified carers, family members and participation workers as the adults they were most likely to talk to about their emotional wellbeing. These worked best and lessened the stigma of seeking help where relationships had been given time to develop and for trust to be earned and support was provided in non-clinical settings whilst undertaking other activities.
• Peer mentoring may be appropriate if support is given and managed well.
• The use of art, play, drama and music should also be used as methods for communication and improving emotional wellbeing.
• If young people are to engage with mental health services work must be undertaken by service providers to engage with young people and to develop trusting relationships.
• Young people who have experienced considerable trauma may have learned that it is safer not to trust adults and may be rejecting of the therapist for much longer than other than young people and creative ways of developing trust and building relationships may be necessary in order for the therapeutic process to begin.
• Considerable work needs to be undertaken to reduce mental health stigma. Involving Looked After Young people in the rebranding of local CAMHS would be helpful so that child centred services can be developed and services reframed so they are more appealing and accessible to young people.

There needs to be more widespread understanding of what it means to be a Looked After Young Person. Participants repeatedly stated that the only representation of children in care that others know is the TV character Tracy Beaker and that they are tired of telling peers that they are ‘not like Tracy Beaker’. Discussions in school around equality and diversity should include conversations about where young people may live. Normalising the idea of Care so that all children understand that young people grow up in a variety of different settings, including foster care and residential care, will help to alleviate some of the stigma attached to children growing up away from the family home and will improve their overall wellbeing and mental health.
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