

Care interventions to support transition for young people leaving care: A Scoping Review

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Dr Julie Feather, Dr Dan Allen, Rhian Crompton,
Zoey Jones, Dr Angela Christiansen, and Gavin Butler



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Dr Julie Feather¹, Dr Dan Allen², Rhian Crompton³, Zoey Jones¹, Dr Angela Christiansen³ and Gavin Butler⁴

¹Edge Hill University

²Liverpool Hope University

³University of Chester

⁴Cheshire West and Chester Council



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Introduction

In July 2022, Cheshire and Merseyside Social Work Teaching Partnership (CMSWTP) funded a team of social work academics from Edge Hill University, Liverpool Hope University and University of Chester and a principal social worker from Cheshire West and Chester (CWAC) adult social care to conduct a scoping review of care interventions to support transition for young people leaving care. This report sets out the findings of the scoping review.

Background

Approximately 2.9 million children worldwide are estimated to be living in residential care (UNICEF, 2022). Roughly 302,979 of those children are from EU countries inclusive of the United Kingdom (UNICEF and Eurochild, 2021). These figures do not include those children and young people who are living in alternative out of home care settings such as foster care. In England alone, national statistics from 2021-2022 show that there are 82,170 children looked after by local authorities, an increase of 2% from the previous year (GOV.UK, 2022). The number of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children increased by 34% in 2021-2022 pushing it above pre-pandemic levels (GOV.UK, 2022). Although there is some variation internationally on the age at which statutory support for young people living in out of home care ends, for most this will be at the age of 18 (Stein, 2019). At this age young people in the United Kingdom (UK) are legally considered to be adults, and there is an expectation that care leavers will be financially independent and self-reliant (Cameron et al., 2018).

The transition from adolescence into adulthood can be a difficult period for all young people. However, for young people leaving care this journey is particularly challenging as they are further expected to make the move into independent living with little support from family or formal care services. Research on care leavers' experiences of leaving care suggests that transition is viewed as an instantaneous, age-driven process with young people feeling ill-prepared for independent living (Atkinson & Hyde, 2019). Unregulated accommodation, a drift through care, multiple social workers and carers, mental health difficulties, tension, anger, grief separation and loss, missing from care episodes and a lack of preparation for adulthood can create feelings of powerlessness, instability and mistrust (Butterworth et al., 2017). Young people leaving care are further at significant risk of experiencing poor mental health (Memarzia et al., 2015), high unemployment rates (Rome & Raskin, 2017), low post secondary educational attainment (Courtney & Hook, 2017) and homelessness (Lindquist-Grantz et al., 2022).

Improving the process of transition for young people leaving care has thus become a key priority for governments internationally. Various types of programmes and interventions have been developed to address gaps in leaving care support. These fall under two broad categories: 1). extended care policies; and 2). transitional care programmes (Gilligan, 2018; Taylor et al., 2021). Extended care policies provide

young people with the option to remain in their existing living arrangements for an extended period in which they will continue to receive ongoing support to prepare them for adulthood (Van Breda et al., 2020). Extended care policies have been implemented in the UK, Denmark, the Netherlands, Norway, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, the United States and Switzerland (Taylor et al., 2021). Alternatively, transitional care programmes include independent living programmes, coaching or peer support programmes, transitional housing programmes and intensive individualised support services (Taylor et al., 2021). The aim of such programmes is to support and equip care leavers with the necessary skills required for adult life (Taylor et al., 2021). Eligibility for leaving care support is however age-determined and subject to conditionality (Gilligan, 2018) meaning that not all young people leaving care will be entitled. According to Field et al. (2021) the 'Staying Put' policy implemented in the UK is a classic example of this whereby only certain young people will be afforded the opportunity to remain in care based on foster carers willingness to extend a placement. In another example, 'Staying Close', a programme of support offered to young people leaving residential care in England, is only offered to young people based on an assessment of need (Allen et al., 2020).

To date, research has focused on the extent to which extended care policies and transitional care programmes improve the process of transition for young people leaving care with some attempting to demonstrate a direct relationship between leaving care interventions and outcomes (Taylor et al., 2021). However, the evidence base on the effectiveness of extended care policies and transition care programmes remains limited (Yelick, 2015; Mendes & Rogers, 2020; Taylor et al., 2021). A recent systematic review undertaken by What Works for Children's Social Care (Taylor et al., 2021) attempted to summarise best evidence on transition policies, programmes, and interventions from around the world. Studies included in the review were based in the United States and Australia and only randomised control trials (RCTs) or quasi-experimental designs were included. Due to the tight inclusion criteria, as required in a systematic review and meta-analysis, there were no UK based studies included and no exploration of transition interventions for care leavers which sit outside of extended care policies and transitional care programmes. Studies that produced qualitative data were also excluded.

Qualitative data can provide important insights into the different types of care interventions that exist for young people leaving care and reasons relating to how and why they work or fail to work. Scoping reviews which allow for the inclusion of various types of literature are a useful tool to identify and map available evidence on a given topic (Peters et al., 2020). They can be used to inform future research and identify knowledge gaps (Peters et al., 2020). The decision to undertake a scoping review of care interventions that support transition for young people leaving care was informed by the need to consider the effectiveness of targeted innovations, particularly with populations of care leavers in countries other than the United States (Taylor et al., 2021). Despite the range of literature available, there has been an unequal focus on how a combination of services, delivered in different ways, can meet the complex needs of young people as they transition from state care.

Research Aims

This scoping review identifies and maps knowledge on different types of care interventions that are currently available to support transition to independent living for young people leaving care.

Research Questions

The scoping review addresses the following research questions:

1. Which care interventions are offered to care leavers to support their transition into independent living?
2. How effective are care interventions in supporting care leavers to achieve positive outcomes in adulthood?
3. What are the recommendations for social work practice?

Methods

Design

The scoping review was conducted in accordance with the Joanna Briggs Institute (JBI) methodology for scoping reviews and the Preferred Reporting Items for Scoping Reviews (PRISMA-ScR) (Peters et al., 2021).

Search strategy

A systematic search of the literature was conducted using a staged approach. The first stage involved undertaking a preliminary limited search for relevant papers in two databases. Titles and abstracts of retrieved papers were analysed by three members of the research team to identify initial search terms. Initial search terms were shared with social work practitioners and managers from Cheshire West and Cheshire Council (CWAC) children's and adult social care teams. Feedback provided by social work practitioners and managers was used to further develop and refine key search terms. An extensive search of four electronic databases: CINAHL complete, Scopus, Social Care Online and Science Direct was then conducted. Specific search terms used included 'care leaver' OR 'care experienced' AND 'intervention' OR 'programme' OR 'service' OR 'policy' AND 'transition' OR 'leaving care' OR 'ageing out of care' OR 'after care' OR 'independent living'. Reference lists of sources were hand searched to identify additional sources. Papers identified from the full search were collated and uploaded into ENDNOTE and duplicates were removed.

Inclusion/exclusion criteria

The following criteria were used to assess eligibility of papers for inclusion in the scoping review: (1) papers published in English between 2012 and 2023; (2) studies reporting empirical data published in a peer review journal; (3) studies reporting on a formal care intervention or programme implemented to support transition for young people leaving care; (4) young people aged 16-25 leaving care; (5) any out of home care setting (foster care, residential care, specialist care); (6) studies reporting on outcomes of interventions or programmes for care leavers; (7) studies undertaken in post-industrial countries. Systematic or scoping reviews, protocol papers, commentaries, conference abstracts and thesis were excluded. Studies that reported on informal care interventions or interventions for populations who were not leaving care were also excluded.

Evidence screening and selection

Titles and abstracts of all retrieved papers were screened by two independent reviewers and assessed against inclusion criteria using the Rayyan.ai platform. Those meeting inclusion criteria were retrieved in full and assessed in greater detail by two reviewers independently. Conflicts were resolved by a third reviewer. Papers that did not meet the inclusion criteria were excluded.

Search results

Search results are displayed in figure 1. The search of electronic databases identified a total of 35,261 citations. 2,716 citations remained after removing duplicates. 2,277 additional citations were excluded at this stage based on the following criteria: (1) wrong subject area; (2) wrong population; (3) did not report on an intervention; (4) wrong country; (5) not primary research. 439 papers were screened at title and abstract stage. In total 294 were excluded as they did not meet inclusion criteria. 145 full text papers were assessed for eligibility. 109 of these papers were excluded as they did not meet the inclusion criteria. An additional hand search was performed of the reference lists of key articles but resulted in no new relevant material being identified. This resulted in 36 articles that were included in the review.

Data extraction and analysis

Guided by the review objectives and questions the research team developed a draft data extraction table (Peters et al., 2020). This was piloted at the initial data extraction stage with two reviewers independently extracting data from five papers (Peters et al., 2020). Following discussion between the research team, the data extraction table was refined. Data extraction included specific details about the publication, study aims, study population and sample size, study design and methods, type of intervention reported, key findings and strengths and limitations of the study. Extracted data were analysed thematically to identify key themes.

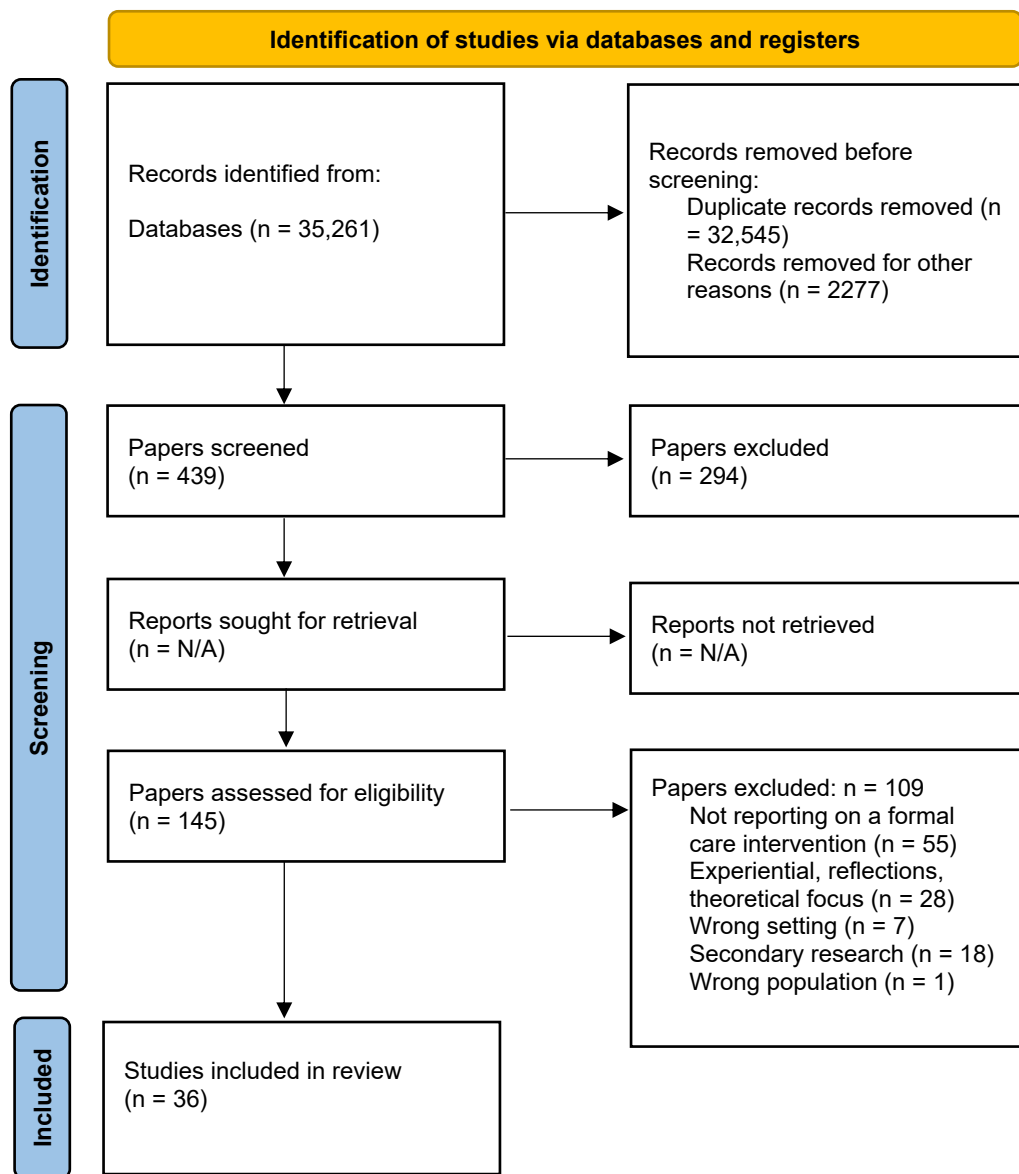


Figure 1: PRISMA 2020 flow diagram for scoping review adapted from (Page et al., 2021).

Findings

Overall description

The 36 articles that explicitly defined interventions offered a detailed view of the interventions that are currently available. Taken together they provided some indication of how a combination of services, delivered in different ways, can meet the complex needs of young people as they transition from state care. Following the detailed process of analysis and data extraction described above, articles were thematically grouped into four broad areas: (1) Extended Care; (2) A Helping Relationship; (3) Family; and, (4) Employment, Education and Training.

Extended Care

14 articles highlighted the strengths and limitations associated with extended care provision designed to help support a transition from care to independent living. In context, extended care enabled young people who were leaving care to receive the ongoing support of a professional carer who was already known to them (Arnau-Sabatés et al., 2021). Whilst some opportunities for extended care reflected new legal obligations designed to prolong the provision of care past the age of eighteen (Courtney et al., 2017), others were implemented to provide a safety net to better support young people who can experience a 'cliff face' of support when their time in care ends (Roberts et al., 2021).

In each example, the texts emphasised the way that extended care could contribute to improved engagement in education, employment and training, and reduce the risk of homelessness. Throughout these articles, young people and their carers described the experience of extended support as providing a valued service that could help alleviate the distress and anxiety that can become particularly acute during their transition from 'care' to independent living (Curry et al., 2015; Field et al., 2021; Brisson et al., 2022).

In addition to the provision of extended care, other articles reported on 'wrap-around care' and 'holistic service provision'. For instance, Lindquist-Grantz et al. (2022) evaluated a project where wrap-around care was designed to prevent homelessness for young people leaving care. In contrast to an extended care model (Arnau-Sabatés et al., 2021), where one key professional carer provided guidance and support to a young adult, the 'wrap-around care' model enabled the advancement of an evidence-based intervention that utilised the expertise of the whole professional team. Although the aim of 'wrap-around care' and 'holistic service provision' was to provide an individualised and holistic goal oriented care-coordination process, as per extended care models, articles that defined the whole team approach recognised the benefit of a community development model of support (Mendes, 2012) that alleviated the pressure on a single professional carer (Lindquist-Grantz et al., 2022).

The articles in this section tended to focus on the value of 'community', illustrating how young people leaving care can be supported to negotiate difficulties by maintaining connections with broader social networks in partnership with a key professional carer. For instance, Mendes and Meade (2014) conducted a study on the 'Stand By Me' leaving care program in Australia. Designed to offer intensive and continuous case support to young people aged 16 years and over, this project targeted support for those transitioning from out-of-home care who were assessed as having fewer community connections, and, as a result, were deemed to be most at risk of homelessness. When describing the importance of 'wrap-around care' and 'holistic service provision', the authors argued that a community development model of support, based on partnership between professionals and mainstream community networks, were more likely to promote the social inclusion of care leavers and by extension facilitate a more successful transition to independent living.

Further examples of extended care included tenancy support services that could promote the importance of practical, social and emotional support (Curry et al., 2015 and Brisson et al., 2022) enabled by effective professional collaborations between young people and their support network (Schelbe et al., 2018). However, as explained by Berridge (2017) and Field et al. (2021), a key barrier to the attainment of extended care was reported in the absence of an effective professional relationship between the young person and the leaving care service. The authors conclude that where there are tensions between young people and the professionals who support them, there can be inconsistent or non-engagement with 'wrap-around care' or 'holistic service provision'. This finding was raised again in the articles that focus on interventions that specifically sought to promote independence with relationship-based practices.

A helping relationship

When considering interventions that sought to promote positive transitions to independent living, 11 articles were foregrounded in the importance of the helping relationship. While the articles reviewed drew upon the term 'relationship' in varying ways, they generally conceptualised the active ability of professionals, role models and peers to provide social and emotional support, trust and availability (Mantovani et al., 2020) in support of the transition to independent living (Cudjoe et al., 2022). With a focus on coaching and mentoring, Powers et al., (2012); Sulimani-Aidan (2016); Sulimani-Aidan et al., (2020); Jarczok et al., (2021) and Brisson et al., (2022) also explained the importance of healthy mutual relationships. As explained by Sulimani-Aidan (2016: 74), however, the main obstacle to the helping relationship presented when the transition to independent living was characterised by complexity:

"...the young adults' descriptions of [coaching and mentoring] revealed their complexity for them, especially in relation to the availability of supportive figures and the extent of support they could offer the young adults during this long and complicated transition."

A crucial feature of many of the articles grouped in this section is the description of a complex transition bound to historical and contemporary tensions between young

people and the professionals in the support network. A tension that, if left unresolved, can lead some young people to refuse the interventions being proposed.

To promote the transition to independent living through a relationship-based practice model, Holt et al., (2012); Ridley et al., (2016) and Butterworth et al., (2017) propose the introduction of a 'Link Worker'. As the 'Link Worker' only becomes involved in the young person's life at the point of transition, each article considered how some young people may be less likely to associate them with previous negative experiences of 'care'. For this reason, the articles explain that young people may be more likely to engage with the 'Link Worker' who can help them to access the interventions being proposed. Increased access to services could then lead to greater opportunities for collaboration and support.

Importantly, while many of the articles documented the importance of a relationship between young people and the professional network, the research grouped in this section also highlighted the added value of peer support. For example, Mantovani et al., (2020) and Cudjoe et al., (2022) each explained how peer mentoring enabled young people to experience a supportive relationship from another 'care experienced' young person. Analysing the strengths and limitations of the peer mentoring scheme, the research found that 'care experienced' mentors could be more available and supportive than the young person's professional network. The advantages of a peer mentor scheme were reported in altered power dynamics and a relationship that could sustain opportunities for guidance and support during the important transitional process.

Throughout their data, articles in this section engaged with fundamental ideas about relationship-based practice, but the theoretical principles used to undergird interventions and activities were not considered in equal depth. Notably, these articles did not consistently demonstrate, as a form of agency, the ways that interventions could enable or inhibit independence, or how the experience of a 'relationship' may be enacted or experienced differently from one cultural context to another. For instance, Cudjoe et al., (2022) report on an ethnographic study of helping relationships in Denmark. However, the paper did not extrapolate the findings for the purpose of transferability. For this reason, it is not clear how the project being considered could be applied elsewhere. In addition, rather than focus on those occasions where a helping relationship was unsuccessful, the researchers in this section assumed that an opportunity for a positive helping relationship could already exist.

The research in this section highlighted the importance of a helping relationship as an enabler of a positive transition to independent living. However, only one paper advanced a conceptual model to aid the development of a helping relationship (Rouski et al., 2022). In this article, Dialectical Behaviour Therapy was reported as an effective tool to enable young people to work with their professional network to understand and accept their difficult feelings, learn new skills to manage them and become (better) able to make positive changes in their lives.

The role of family

5 articles clustered in this section argued that the transition from care to independent living was better enabled when young people were supported to plan and discuss the opportunity for reunification with their family (Holt et al., 2012; Butterworth et al., 2017, and Ridley et al., 2016). These papers argued that the inclusion of the young person's family in interventions designed to support transitions to independent living could also help the young person to manage difficult feelings and provide emotional and social support (Fernandez-Simo et al., 2022). Whilst targeted interventions designed to facilitate opportunities for reunification with family during the transition to independent living were reported as being important for some young people, Devenney (2017) explained that the helping relationship with family members is lost to unaccompanied young people. As a result, the author concludes that extra care is needed to support unaccompanied young people whose transition might be complicated further by the absence of a family network and uncertainty about immigration status.

Employment, Education and Training

13 articles suggested that the transition from care to independent living could be better supported through interventions that provided targeted support for employment, education, and training. Some researchers argued that education programmes that can equally focus on informal education and formal education can also promote opportunities for social mobility as an enabler of a positive transition (Jones, 2014). In this context, Jackson et al., (2012: 1112) define informal education as the kind of learning that 'goes on outside educational settings and in 'free' time'. The specific value of informal education is that it can widen social networks and bring young people leaving care into contact with adults who can act as role models. All articles grouped in this section showed that engagement in formal and informal employment, education and training can be limited by the existence of relational or perceptual tensions described above.

Building on the opportunities described by Jones (2014) and Jackson et al., (2012), Fernandez-Simo et al., (2022), Furey et al., (2021) and Gilligan et al., (2017) found that a young person's transition to independent living could be better supported where there was the prioritised facilitation of social support networks that extended to include employment, education and training opportunities. Here the inclusion of employers, colleagues, teachers and training providers in the young person's support network could help centralise the importance and presence of a relationship with professionals that was built on trust and mutual respect. Working alongside family members, peers and other connected professionals, this extended system was reported to support young people to experience responsibility and accountability whilst receiving the guidance and support at the time and place it was needed.

Despite the reported advantages, the important intersection of support that could be provided by education staff, employers and training facilitators was also cited as a cause of tension for unaccompanied young people. According to Devenney (2017) any uncertainty in immigration status can actively hinder a positive transition to adulthood as young people struggle to maintain their own biographical narrative or

engage in employment, education and training opportunities. Drawing on Giddens (1991) concept of ontological security, Devenney (2017: 1315) argues that:

'the creation and maintenance of coherent biographical narratives helps [unaccompanied young people] sustain a sense of self that is stable across time, space, and context.'

The relevance of biographical narratives in the transition to independent adulthood means that the role of education staff, employers, and training facilitators loses all meaning when uncertainty about the present and the future remains. The absence of family presents an additional challenge to the realisation of a positive transition for unaccompanied young people who may be denied the opportunity to engage in formal and informal employment, education and training opportunities. This finding reinforces Mantovani et al., (2020) conclusion about the importance of positive professional helping relationships for unaccompanied young people who may be at more risk of being cut adrift when the time in 'care' comes to an end.

Central to interventions that aimed to promote education, employment and training were youth empowerment programmes, designed to promote and sustain positive psychological empowerment (Nesmith et al., 2014). Batista et al., (2018) evaluated the benefits of a programme designed to enable young people in America to take a proactive and influential role in the development of leaving care policy. The authors reported that young people who participated in the scheme were more likely to experience higher perceived control, motivation to influence their environments, self-efficacy, and participatory behavior compared to those who did not. As an example of informal employment, the authors found that youth empowerment programmes had particular benefits for young people transitioning to independent living. Despite the important contributions of Nesmith et al., (2014) and Batista et al., (2018) there remains a dearth of evidence to prove whether youth empowerment programmes work for young people living in or leaving care outside of America.

Focusing on the concept of resilience as an important characteristic that enables young people to overcome some of the adversities associated with a complex transition, four articles grouped in this section focused on independent living skills training. Whilst Bond (2020) recognises that independent living skills training provided on an ad hoc basis can lead to variable results, Sims-Schouten et al., (2017), Chaffers (2022) and Hlungwani et al., (2022), each show that formal interventions designed to train young people to develop 'life skills' can promote resilience and support a more positive transition. In this context, Sims-Schouten et al., (2017: 1482) define 'life skills' training as:

'A project designed to improve the life chances and outcomes for those who are moving towards, or have recently left care, with a specific focus on improving employability, training, housing, and mental health and wellbeing.'

In each paper, the evidence around leaving care and adversity, including mental health problems was established as a root cause of other problems such as educational inequality, unemployment and social exclusion. The articles by Sims-Schouten et al., (2017), Chaffers (2022), Bond, (2020) and Hlungwani et al., (2022) each showed how

targeted training interventions around 'life skills' could not only build resilience but also contribute to better mental health outcomes for young people leaving care.

Whilst the research on 'life skills' training has implications for practice and policy, these articles also highlight the importance of a professional helping relationship that can centralise the views and opinions of a young person, taking seriously their recommendations for a more accessible, acceptable, responsive, and age-appropriate service provision (Sims-Schouten et al., 2017). As seen in previous sections, this relationship can become restricted where unresolved tensions remain.

One specific training intervention designed to enable young people to articulate tensions or anxieties that they might be experiencing during their transition to independent living adulthood was described by Loughheed (2019). Reporting on the outcomes of a doctoral study undertaken in Canada, the author found that mindfulness-based training benefited young people leaving care in many ways. By increasing self-awareness, emotion regulation, optimism, and sleep hygiene, the paper highlights the importance of mindfulness training for young people experiencing adversity, trauma, loss, and marginalisation. The paper concludes that mindfulness is a skill that can enable a more positive transition to independence, including engagement with employment, education and training, regardless of the support network, the helping relationship or the opportunity for extended care. It overlooks the possibility that the intersection of all these factors are at least mutually inclusive and equally important to meet the complex needs of young people as they transition from state care.

Discussion

Consistent with the advice of Taylor et al., (2021), the completion of this scoping review was informed by the need to consider the effectiveness of targeted innovations, particularly with populations of care leavers in countries other than the United States. Despite the range of literature available, there has been an unequal focus on how a combination of services, delivered in different ways, can meet the complex needs of young people as they transition from state care.

In the section above, we have summarised the literature to show that the combination of policy concordats for extended care, a helping relationship (formal and informal/professional and personal), family support, targeted approaches to support and enable education, employment and training, and programmes designed to reduce tensions associated with the experience of leaving care can contribute to a more successful transition to independent living. For illustration, these factors have been mapped to provide a conceptual model designed to illustrate how the combination of services described could co-exist within an original framework of practice (see Figure 2 below).

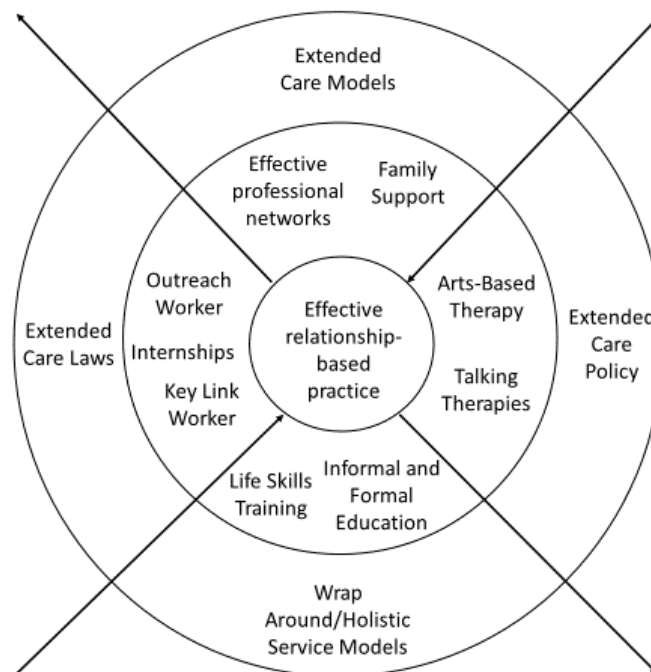


Figure 2: Framework for leaving care interventions

The outermost ring of the model underscores the importance of legislative and social policy changes that are designed to extend the period of ‘care’ past the age of 18. Unless actions to support a positive transition to independent living are supported by clear and robust social policy concordats, the literature has shown that extended care and wraparound/holistic service models are likely to fail (Courtney et al., 2017; Roberts et al., 2021). Where the eligibility for leaving care support is determined by age or service availability, as opposed to individual need, the actions needed to implement the essential social, emotional and material support that young people leaving state care need can also be lost (Gilligan, 2018; Field et al., 2021).

The central ring of the model illustrates the examples of social, emotional and material support reported in the literature. Whilst interventions designed to implement support in these areas recognised specific need, very few recognised the value in providing the combination of services that are listed. Only by conducting this scoping review has it been possible to illustrate how the combination of interventions reported in the literature could co-exist to help promote (more) positive action.

Interventions led by a designated ‘Link’ or ‘Outreach’ worker rely on professional networks that can work effectively with the young person and the young person’s family (where appropriate) to co-produce and attain common goals (Holt et al., 2012;

Butterworth et al., 2017, and Ridley et al., 2016). Formal and informal approaches to support 'Life skills' through education, employment and training can increase the young person's self-esteem (Sims-Schouten et al., 2017; Chaffers, 2022; and Hlungwani et al., 2022) and ensure that help, guidance and support is offered at the time and place that it is needed (Bond, (2020). At a time of critical complexity, talking and arts-based therapies (Rouski et al., 2022) can also enable young people to engage with their helping networks, articulate their anxieties and worries, and build capacity for transformative change (Lougheed, 2019). Any intervention that is able to achieve all of the core elements of practice illustrated in the inner circle could, therefore, demonstrate a solid evidence-informed approach to support the leaving care experience.

The inner circle represents the importance of effective relationship-based practices. The directional arrows also suggest that without legislative and social policy changes, the opportunity to implement the combination of services and achieve effective relationship-based practices so crucial to a positive transition cannot be guaranteed. Equally, where existing tensions serve to limit relationship-based practices, the opportunity to implement the combination of services in line with legislative and social policy changes cannot be guaranteed either. It is for this reason that effective relationship-based practice is illustrated as the core feature of the framework for leaving care interventions.

Despite the focus on the importance of relationship-based practices, the interventions described in the 36 articles included in this review were not consistently accompanied by a specific theoretical foundation. In each paper there was also minimal emphasis on exploration on the theory of social interdependence as a model to support and guide the transition. Instead, the collective focus on the transition to independent living appeared to place unequal emphasis on the roles and responsibilities of the young person, with no sustained approach to analyse the role of the professional, or family support network, in relationship development.

As shown in the introduction above, there are several factors that influence the ability of leaving care services to build interventions on the foundation of relationship-based practice. Unregulated accommodation, a drift through care, multiple social workers and carers, mental health difficulties, tension, anger, grief separation and loss, missing from care episodes all exist to create a negative perception of care for (young people and their carers) and feelings of powerlessness, instability and mistrust (Butterworth et al., 2017). The challenge for any organisation seeking to support the transition of young people to independent living is how to account for these negative perspectives, and a refusal to accept or engage with the services on offer, whilst recognising the same as properties of each individual, thus determining agency.

According to Ferguson (2007:129), the actions needed to enable a positive perspective of care 'requires nothing less than a radical reconstruction of the painfully low status children in care have historically had to endure'. Although these words were written 16 years ago, the state care system in the UK, and throughout the world, continues to be defined by structural neglect, minimum physical resources, unfavourable and unstable staffing patterns, and socially emotionally inadequate

professional relationships and interactions (van IJzendoorn, et al., 2022). Whilst the interventions summarised in this scoping review underpin innovations in policy pathways and practices that seek to address this sudden loss of help that is reported (Yelick, 2015; Mendes & Rogers, 2020; Taylor et al., 2021), more formal action is needed to improve the perspective, experience and life chances of those living and suffering in 'care' (Stein, 2019).

The government ban on the use of unregulated accommodation for children under the age of 16 in England is an encouraging step to improving a positive perspective of 'care', but there is also the need for a root and branch restructuring and transformation of the presently under-resourced, under-trained, deeply fragmented, business-focused, and, at times, unfit for purpose care system (Stein, 2019). If young people are not being supported in a way that raises and promotes their want to be in 'care', it can hardly be true to claim that they will engage with interventions designed to help them leave.

The findings presented in this study suggest that urgent action is needed to ensure that the positive perspective of 'care' improves, so that the combination of services described in 'Framework for leaving care interventions' can be implemented together to meet the complex needs of young people as they transition to independent living.

Conclusion

This scoping review was commissioned by the Cheshire and Merseyside Social Work Teaching Partnership (CMSWTP). Its aim was informed by the need to consider the effectiveness of targeted innovations, particularly with populations of care leavers in countries other than the United States. Despite the range of literature available, there has been an unequal focus on how a combination of services, delivered in different ways, can meet the complex needs of young people as they transition from state care.

Presenting a summary of the 36 articles included in the review, this report has highlighted the importance of interventions that seek to support the transition of young people leaving care to independent living through extended care services, a helping relationship, family support and employment, education and training. Illustrating the amalgamation of these factors in an original framework for leaving care interventions, the report has underscored the central importance of relationship-based practices and the need for further investment in interventions designed to enable young people to develop a positive perspective of a life in and after care.

Appendix – Overview of included studies

Author	Year	Country	Aim	Participants/settings	Study design	Data collection method	Intervention type
Arнау-Sabatés et al.	2021	America and Spain	Compares how two jurisdictions support care leavers transition into adulthood	20 child welfare professionals (nine in Illinois and 11 in Catalonia) from NGOs	Qualitative study	Semi-structured interviews	Leaving care services
Batista et al.	2018	America	To examine the effects of youth empowerment programs (YEPs) on the psychological empowerment of young people aging out of foster care	193 young adults (99 YEP participants and 94 non-YEP participants), aged 18- 24	Quantitative study	Cross-sectional comparison survey	Youth empowerment programme
Berridge	2017	United Kingdom	To examine the process of selection and preparation of young people for driving lessons	6 male residential care leavers aged 17, 3 managers	Qualitative study	Interviews	Driving lessons

Bond	2020	South Africa	To establish what services aimed at preparing young people in care for leaving the care system are offered, what follow-up services are available, and the evaluation of these services by young people on the verge of aging out of care, child and youth care workers (CYCWs), and social workers	4 child and youth care centres in South Africa were used as research sites. 12 young people in care between 17-18 years old. 4 social workers. 9 CWCW's (child and youth care workers)	Qualitative study	Focus groups	Independent living skills programmes
Brisson et al.	2022	America	To assess the characteristics of Bridging the Gap (intervention) and to understand the needs and successes of the BTG programme	82 former BTG participants for an administrative case review. 15 former BTG participants and 3 current and former BTG Independent Living Coaches for interviews	Mixed methods	Interviews; review of administrative case data	Housing services and independent living coach

Butterworth et al.	2017	United Kingdom	To understand the weaknesses in the current mental health and social care pathway to inform service development of transition support services	12 young people, 12 professionals and analysis of 40 case notes	Mixed methods	Case note analysis; semi-structured interviews	Link worker
Courtney and Hook	2017	America	To examine whether any observed educational benefits of the extended care policy persist in the years after youth have exited care	732 youth at baseline; 90.8% (n = 665) to followed to Wave 5	Longitudinal cohort study	Longitudinal interviews	Extended care
Cudjoe et al.	2022	Denmark	To explore the perspectives of foster care leavers about their experiences with support resources from a non-governmental social service	17 foster care leavers	Ethnographic study	In-depth interviews	Peer support

			organisation in Denmark				
Curry and Abrams	2015	America	To investigate young adults' journeys through transitional housing programmes	14 transition-age youth (18 to 24 years) drawn from two transitional housing programs in Los Angeles County	Qualitative study	Photo-elicitation interviews	Transitional housing
Devenney	2017	England, United Kingdom	To explore how unaccompanied young people (UYP) create biographical narratives of their past, present, and future as they prepare to leave care	18 UYP and 12 social work professionals in one large local authority in the North of England	Biographical qualitative study	Interviews	Pathway plans
Fernandez-Simo et al.	2022	Spain	To analyse which strategies of socio-educational intervention with unaccompanied minors from Africa are effective during the process of transition to adult life	29 young people (26 men and 3 women)	Qualitative study	Focus groups; longitudinal follow-up interviews	Socio-educational intervention

Field et al.	2021	England, United Kingdom	To explore the leaving care needs and experiences of young women in a specialist therapeutic residential out-of-home care provision	Five young women, aged 16–18, and four professionals working within the home	Qualitative case study	Interviews	Specialist therapeutic housing support provision
Furey and Harris-Evans	2021	England, United Kingdom	To explore Ungar's (2011) ecological model of resilience as a framework for understanding the experiences of care leavers entering the workplace	Care leavers in one local authority children's social care department and workplace supervisors	Qualitative study	Interviews; focus group	Internship programme
Gilligan and Arnau-Sabatés	2017	Ireland and Spain	To explore how carers may influence the entry of young people in care into the world of work and how they may also influence the young people's	22 care leavers, aged 23-33 years from two case sites	Multiple case study design	Open-ended interviews	Work-related support for care leavers

			progress in that world				
Hlungwani et al.	2022	South Africa	To explore the contribution of “managed opportunities for independence” (MOI) in building the resilience of young people in care	Nine child and youth care workers from various child and youth care centres in South Africa	Qualitative study	Semi-structured interviews	Managed opportunities for independence
Holt and Kirwin	2012	Ireland	To investigate what ‘key working’ involves, what ‘key working’ means to young care-leavers and residential care-workers; and what role, if any, the key working relationship plays in preparing a young person for both the transition to after care and also in the post-care period	Three residential childcare units; 20 key worker staff, three after-care workers and four young people	Qualitative case study	Focus groups; interviews	Key worker

Jackson and Cameron	2012	England, Demark, Sweden, Spain and Hungary	To explore how more care leavers could be encouraged to stay in school longer and enabled to access further and higher education	170 young people aged 18–24	Mixed methods	Literature and policy review; secondary analysis of published and unpublished statistics; surveys; interviews	Pathways to education
Jarczok et al.	2021	Switzerland	To investigate the trajectories and characteristics of care leavers in the pilot phase of Switzerland's first large-scale after-care programme	459 care leavers from out-of-home care institutions in Switzerland	Mixed methods	Telephone interviews; descriptive analysis	Coaching support system
Jones	2014	America	To explore the viewpoints of youth six months after discharge from foster care regarding how well they were prepared for life after care	106 former youth	Mixed methods	Questionnaire	Residential education for independence

Lindquist-Grantz et al.	2022	America	To provide an initial examination of individual changes over time for youth who enrolled in a wraparound care programme during the formative evaluation period	87 youths (18-24) who participated in the Watch Me Rise programme	Quantitative	Repeated questionnaires	Wrap around care
Lougheed	2019	Canada	To explore how an innovate mindfulness-based intervention (MBI) was experienced by young people leaving care	8 young people (6 female and 2 male)	Qualitative study	Semi-structured interviews	Arts and mindfulness-based group
Mantovani et al.	2020	United Kingdom	To explore how a 1-year peer-mentoring relationship contributed to change in young women "in care"	11 mentors and nine mentees recruited from two local authorities in London	Qualitative case study design	Semi-structured interviews	Peer-mentoring relationship
Mendes	2012	Australia	To examine what works in leaving care	19 YP (aged 17-22) who had recently commenced	Qualitative, exploratory design	Semi-structured	Leaving care and after-care

			programmes in Australia	involvement in either the employment and/or mentoring programme. Nine females and ten males		interviews; focus groups	support services
Mendes and Meade	2014	Australia	To test and substantiate the difference the Stand By Me programme and its interventions make to the leaving care outcomes of young people who are most at risk, and determine how well they achieve this	12 young people (five females and seven males)	Qualitative action research study	Interviews	Holistic, wrap-around support
Mendes and Purtell	2017	Australia	To understand to what extent the UK Personal Adviser model could be translated to the Australian and Victorian child, youth and family welfare service system context	9 young people from the SBM supported group; 8 young people from the non SBM supported group; professionals and carers (4 SBM workers and managers, 8 non SBM staff)	Qualitative study	Interviews; focus groups	Holistic, wrap-around support

Mmusi et al.	2017	South Africa	To investigate how a sample of male care-leavers from Girls and Boys Town South Africa transferred social skills into independent living	Ten young men who had left care 2–5 years previously	Qualitative study	Semi-structured interviews	Independent living programme
Nathans	2022	America	To explore the effectiveness of a multi-domain Independent Living Program (ILP) in providing services to older foster youth transitioning to adulthood	Analysis of 119 Independent Living (IL) plans of 97 current and former foster youth between the ages of 14 and 21	Mixed methods	Analysis of case documents; review of IL plans and case notes	Independent living programme
Nesmith and Chrispherson	2014	America	To assess the utility and effectiveness of a foster care model designed to improve youth transitions to adulthood	88 foster youth (14-19 years old) who were in the care of 2 foster care agencies	Mixed methods	Interviews using two self-report scales	Youth empowerment programme
Powers et al.	2012	America	To evaluate the efficacy of the	69 youth (aged 16.5-17.5). 33 intervention	Longitudinal RCT study	Questionnaires	Coaching and mentoring

			Take Charge self-determination intervention for improving transition outcomes for youth in foster care and special education	group and 36 comparison group			
Ridley et al.	2016	United Kingdom	To identify key elements of good quality practitioner relationships with children or young people	169 children and YP across 11 local authorities and 5 independent social work practices (SWPs). 121 from SWPs and 48 from comparison sites.	Mixed methods	Surveys; interviews; analysis of care plans and secondary data	Independent social work practices
Roberts et al.	2021	Wales	To explore the support available to care leavers during the Covid-19 pandemic from their corporate parents	22 local authority professionals and 17 care experienced young people (aged 17-24)	Mixed methods	Interviews; survey	Extended support
Rouski et al.	2022	England, United Kingdom	To explore young people's perspectives of the Skills for Living service	10 young people who attended the skills for living service	Qualitative study	Semi-structured interviews	Dialectic behaviour therapy

Schelbe	2018	America	To understand youths' and service providers' perceptions and experiences about the housing programme	19 youths (aged 18-22) in ASOMO programme	Qualitative study	Interviews; observations	Subsidised housing programme
Sims-Schouten and Hayden	2017	United Kingdom	To explore the unfolding personal narratives of young care leavers in relation to their mental health and wellbeing and the role of a life-skills programme in supporting	22 young people (11 males and 11 females)	Qualitative	Semi-structured interviews; documentary analysis	Life-skills project
Sulimani-Aidan	2016	Israel	To describe the relationships young adults who left care have with their mentors	140 care leavers (55% were young men and 45% were young women, with an average age of 20.5)	Qualitative, exploratory study	Questionnaire	Mentoring
Sulimani-Aidan et al.	2020	Israel	To examine the contribution of natural mentoring to the	174 adolescents in residential care in Israel	Quantitative study	Questionnaire	Mentoring

			improvement of life skills among youth in care in core areas of education, employment, and avoidance of risk behaviours while controlling for personal characteristics and placement history				
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