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SCHOOL HEALTH
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Wellbeing in young people in foster care in Wales

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UK studies have found that 'looked after young people' (LAYP) have poorer health and educational outcomes than their peers, but evidence from Wales is limited. Data from 2015 show that over 5,500 young people were in the care of their local authority and the majority of these young people were living in foster care. What do we know about the health and wellbeing of these young people?

What we already know...

Young people in foster care are likely to have a history of maltreatment before they entered care. In Wales, 66% of LAYP have experienced abuse and neglect and 14% family dysfunction.

LAYP in the UK have higher rates of substance misuse, poorer mental health and lower wellbeing than young people not living in care.

Healthy social relationships, including with teachers and peers at school, can help protect against substance misuse and poor mental health, but LAYP are more likely to have difficulties forming relationships and to experience bullying at school.



What we did...

- We used data from 28,838 students aged 11 to 16 who took part in the 2015/16 Student Health and Wellbeing Survey in Wales.
- Students reported who they lived with and were divided into two groups: those living in foster care and those living in dual parent, single parent or stepfamilies.
- Students answered questions on their alcohol, tobacco and drug use and their overall life satisfaction.
- They also rated the quality of their relationships with their teachers and their friends, including being able to count on their friends, being bullied and experience of dating violence.
- We compared the health and wellbeing of students in foster care to those not living in care. We then investigated whether relationships with teachers and peers were linked to differences between the two groups.

In a nutshell

- **Students living in foster care were more likely to smoke regularly, to binge drink and to have used cannabis in the last month.**
- **Students living in foster care were more likely to report low life satisfaction and to report lower quality relationships with their teachers, friends and romantic partners.**
- **The quality of social relationships reported by students in foster care was linked to their substance use and life satisfaction - those with better, health protective relationships reported lower substance use and higher life satisfaction, whilst those with lower quality relationships reported the opposite.**



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What we found...

Substance misuse, wellbeing and social relationships in students living in foster care

- When compared to other students, those living in foster care were more likely to smoke weekly or more, to have used cannabis recently, to binge drink and to have ever used Mephedrone.
- Students in foster care were also more likely to report low life satisfaction.
- Students in foster care were more likely to have been bullied and to have experienced dating violence. They were also more likely to have low quality relationships with teachers and not to be able to count on their friends.

Quality of relationships, substance misuse and wellbeing

- Among all students, low quality relationships with teachers and experience of dating violence were associated with greater substance misuse. Having been bullied was also associated with all forms of substance misuse, except cannabis.

- Being able to count on friends was associated with binge drinking, but also with lower life satisfaction.

The impact of relationship quality on substance misuse and wellbeing in students in foster care

- Twenty to thirty percent of the associations between living in foster care and tobacco, alcohol and cannabis use were accounted for by low quality social relationships.
- The association between living in foster care and low life satisfaction was mitigated by the presence of good quality relationships.



Issues to consider

This study included a large number of students from schools that are representative of secondary schools in Wales as a whole.

The question used to identify young people living in care was quite crude and may have led to some young people in other forms of care, for example residential care, being missed.

All the data was collected at the same point in time (a cross-sectional survey) so we cannot say with certainty that low quality social relationships were causing the differences seen in students in living in foster care.

The Student Health and Wellbeing Survey was funded by Public Health Wales.

What does this mean for my school?

- **School policies and interventions that reduce bullying, promote healthy romantic relationships and instil positive teacher-student relationships may support students in care to develop healthy interpersonal relationships which improve their wellbeing and help prevent substance misuse.**

Read the research paper in full. Download for free here:

<http://bmjopen.bmj.com/content/7/2/e014198>

Long S et al (2017) Comparison of substance use, subjective well-being and interpersonal relationships among young people in foster care and private households: a cross sectional analysis of the School Health Research Network survey in Wales. *BMJ Open* 7:e014198