

Well-being support in secondary schools and Further Education (FE) colleges for children and young people with experiences of care

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Key messages

- **The mental health and wellbeing needs** of care-experienced learners and students are complex, and vary by placement type. In particular, the needs of adopted children and young people were not widely considered.
- **Provision in schools** was child-centred and tailored to need. Approaches which involve learners, and parents and carers, which prioritise relationship-building (with staff and peers), and which encourage a sense of belonging, were favoured by all stakeholders.
- **Transitions** were key times where care-experienced young people needed support and there are clear opportunities to improve support as they transition to college, to ensure they benefit from continuing in education beyond the age of 16.
- **Partnership working between education, health and social care** is critical to improving mental health and wellbeing provision for care-experienced, children and young people, and should be informed by children and young people, and parent and carer voices.

What we already know...

Evidence of effective approaches to support the mental health and wellbeing of care-experienced children and young people in educational settings is sparse. There is limited understanding as to how the educational system might work with health and social care systems to implement evidence-based approaches, particularly at key educational transition points, such as the transition to post-16 education. These gaps translated into the WiSC Study – Wellbeing in Schools and Colleges.

What we did...

The study aimed to understand mental health and wellbeing provision in secondary schools and FE Colleges, specifically for care-experienced children and young people (including those currently or formerly in foster, kinship or residential care, with a Special Guardianship Order, or adopted). Research questions focussed on understanding: mental health and wellbeing needs; provision in schools and colleges, including experiences of provision and barriers and facilitators; and how schools and colleges worked with practitioners across social care and mental health.

A mixed method study design included:

- Re-analysis of data from 28,838 students aged 11 to 16 who took part in the 2017/18 Student Health and Wellbeing (SHW) survey in Wales, and also data from the School Environment Questionnaire, completed by 161 schools.
- Consultations with children and young people, adoptive parents and carers, practitioners, and with national and regional stakeholders.
- Case studies were conducted in four diverse local authorities and included secondary schools, FE colleges, social care teams, and mental health teams.
- Semi-structured interviews and focus groups were conducted with school and college students (n=10), carers (n=2), and education, social care and mental health practitioners (n=37).

What we found...

Mental health & wellbeing needs: The SHW survey showed that children and young people in care had significantly poorer mental health and wellbeing compared to their peers, with those in residential care reporting the poorest mental health and wellbeing. There were peaks in need around transition from primary to secondary school, the lead up to exams, school holidays, and also when there were significant changes in a learner's life. A need to feel a sense of belonging at school was also described:

"I think it's a really powerful thing for mental health and wellbeing when you feel that you belong.

And I think that group of children are at risk of not experiencing that sense of belonging."

(Headteacher)

Going to college also intensified needs and often coincided with moves to independent living. There was limited awareness of the needs of adopted children and young people across the case studies.

Secondary school provision: Secondary data analysis showed that relationships in the school setting may be particularly difficult for the residential care group. There were few examples of provision specifically for care-experienced learners. Instead, schools took a person-centred approach, tailored to learner needs:

"There's so much going on [in school]. It's not predominantly for looked-after children, but it is encouraged. [...] we would say it to a looked-after child who is presenting fine [...] 'I think that it would be a good idea if you joined this club.' We are a bit more forthright with them." (Looked After Children Support Officer)

Transition and college provision: Nearly half of schools surveyed had protocols to help transition to college, and in some cases there were extensive links between schools and colleges to support students during transition, including passing on details about support mechanisms that worked well for learners in school:

“We’ll be saying, right, that’s something that they really have benefited from. If they didn’t have that, their attendance probably would drop. If they didn’t have that daily contact from some adults.”

(Additional Learning Needs Co-ordinator)

Individualised approaches supported moves to independent living, but some colleges focussed on attainment rather than wellbeing.

Barriers and facilitators: In schools, a key barrier was lack of understanding of the care experience amongst staff, whereas peer and staff relationships were key facilitators. The findings also suggested that care-experienced learners could sometimes be a challenging group to help, and all they wanted was to be the same as their peers:

“Most of our children who are in care don’t want to be treated any differently. You know, they want to be the same as their friends.” (Head of Year)

At transition to college, lack of information sharing was a key barrier, which hindered provision of enhanced support, however, access to a range of staff on-site was an important facilitator.

Stakeholder experiences: Parents’ and carers’ experiences of school provision was variable and depended on schools’ understanding of the care experience. Learners talked about their relationships with staff and the value of having someone to talk to:

“You can walk in any classroom pretty much and just go talk to a teacher, voice your concerns, they’re there, they will listen to you.” (Learner)

School staff noted the impact of supporting learners on their own wellbeing – in terms of the scale and depth of issues. Students experienced limited understanding of needs, but also more positive experiences where they were supported by a consistent individual during transition.

Working with social care and mental health teams: Multi-agency working was seen as important for effective, holistic support, and this was supported by ‘spanner roles’ such as the Virtual School Headteacher.

“Their support that they [Virtual Schools] give us as a school and me knowing who I can go to, to get that support if I don’t know the answer to questions, has been absolutely amazing.” (School Safeguarding Lead)

The value of services employing people from different practice backgrounds to enhance cross-practitioner understanding was also described.

Study recommendations

For all organisations involved in supporting care-experienced children and young people:

- The voices of care-experienced children and young people and their parents and carers should be integral to future changes and developments.
- Mental health and wellbeing support for care-experienced children and young people should be coordinated at the national level.
- Strengthening collaborations between education, mental health and social care should include investment in 'spanner roles' and exploring other related innovations.

Transitions were frequently cited as a time of increased need. Recommendations include:

- Enhancing transition to college through a single point of support.
- Supporting the transition of care-experienced young people from CAMHS to adult mental health services.

For schools and colleges:

- Building a sense of belonging for care-experienced learners through supporting long-term relationships with staff, and through nurturing and sustaining friendships.
- Offering or continuing to offer, child and young person-centred support to care-experienced learners that is flexible and responsive to their needs.
- Schools, colleges and others to explore ways to foreground adopted children and young people's needs.
- Schools, local authorities and Welsh Government to support staff mental health and wellbeing, specifically in relation to their work supporting care-experienced learners.
- Raising awareness of care-experienced student needs and improving internal college communications to develop systems that balance privacy and information sharing.
- Reviewing pastoral roles and funding to address sustainability.
- Providing bilingual wellbeing resources which can be easily accessed.

Next steps

Reports, journal articles and other study related news will be available at: <https://decipher.uk.net/>

You can also contact us for updates: wisc@cardiff.ac.uk

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