

Building Resilience: An Evidence-based Approach to Support Young People to Thrive Beyond Out-of-Home Care

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Raising the age in which young people exit Out-of-home Care (OoHC) presents new challenges for how service providers (government and not for profit) conceptualise services and successful transitions from care, however, this provides us the perfect opportunity to re-evaluate what the future of leaving care in South Australia could look like. Evidence shows the transition to adulthood is particularly challenging for young people leaving OoHC.¹

In South Australia, young people exit statutory OoHC at 18 years old regardless of the individual's capacity to care for themselves. Young people exiting residential care are at an even greater disadvantage than their peers in family based placements as these young people may be supported by the family beyond 18 through the Stability in Foster Care program. The Stability in Foster Care Program allows for carers to continue receiving payments until

21 if the young person is engaged in education and/or employment.

Evidence shows that 18 is too young and that society needs to do more to support children and young people in care to develop independent living skills to thrive into adulthood.²

This is consistent with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, under which Australia, as a signatory, is required to provide



Stairs by Tara

Image courtesy of Stefaan Bruce-Truglio

the support and resources to help young people develop and achieve the best long-term outcomes.³ The recent successful Home Stretch Campaign in Victoria, has shown how states can successfully extend care to 21 years.⁴ In line with the argument to extend the age for all young people leaving OoHC to 21 years across the nation, Junction has considered service provision in residential care, drawing on national and international best practice.

Through a three-year partnership with the University of Adelaide, Junction has implemented an outcomes framework to capture data on how children and young people in its residential care services are building resilience. This was supported by the introduction and strengthening of Independent Living Skills Assessments (ILSA) and client survey data.

Research shows young people who are prepared before leaving care are more likely to have better outcomes once leaving.⁵ Hence, it is critical to explore these existing frameworks that focus on the development of young people with the appropriate independent living skills, which can be adapted to support a care model where young people leave OoHC at 21 years.

Independent living skills are critical for all young people to develop before transitioning out of care. Young people in OoHC are often developmentally behind their peers in their competency of independent living skills due to their disrupted care experiences.⁶ As a result, the development of these skills are often overlooked as they are considered assumed knowledge. For this reason, having Independent Living Skills Assessments (ILSAs) is critical to understanding a young person's level of competency and the gaps in their knowledge. Junction's ILSA is based on the Casey Life Skills tool,⁷ which assesses the basic skills of children and young people.

Junction's ILSA breaks down skill competencies by age groups: 0 to 4, 5 to 7, 8 to 10, 11 to 14, and 15 to 18. By using ILSAs, workers can personalise each young person's case plan to focus on the skills and knowledge that a young person needs to develop, which can be measured through the outcomes framework.

Junction, in partnership with the University of Adelaide, developed its own outcomes framework in line with the National Standard for out-of-home care.⁸ The outcomes framework provides the opportunity for young people to set aspirational goals for improved development and wellbeing. These goals align with six life domains to measure success for young people: health and wellbeing; housing and accommodation; legal and finance; education/employment/training; culture and behaviour; and interpersonal relationships, living skills and personal safety. As young people progress with their goals they achieve increasingly stabilised emotional wellbeing. Clients progress from becoming competent in basic fundamental skills, such as identifying fruit and vegetables as healthy, to more advanced skills, such as reading and understanding food product labels. The development of these skills works towards achieving higher-level goals within the life domains, for example, for young people to be physically healthy and make healthy lifestyle choices. Best practice shows that the measurement of outcomes should be based on triangulated data,⁹ for example, this could be collecting the perspectives of both young people and staff.

The implementation of ILSA's and outcomes measurement frameworks, implemented by Junction, in the care model for young people 18 to 21 years old will be beneficial to improving the development of independent living skills and the transition to adulthood. In this proposed extended model of care, services must be devoted to providing the support and guidance for young people to practice independence and engage with age appropriate activities that will achieve better long-term outcomes. For this to occur, these frameworks would have to be adapted to reflect the needs of young people between the age of 18 and 21. For example, each ILSA would be applied to meet young people at the developmental stage that they are at and the skill level they have achieved. More advanced independent skills accompanied by appropriate assessment include topics such as safe relationships; financial competency (credit safety, protecting your identity, and financial counselling); life goals

and coaching; and career and education counselling.

The recent success of the Home Stretch campaign in Victoria shows that it is no longer a question of should the age of leaving care be extended to 21, but what should this model of care look like? It is expected that South Australia, along with all other states, should be prioritising the extension of OoHC to 21 years. These extra three years of care for young people is a critical time of development. Hence, it is important that the appropriate systems and supports are implemented to enhance the development of independent living skills. The integration of ILSAs and an appropriate outcomes measurement framework, as shown by Junction, will enable individualised case plans for young people to focus on their competency to successfully transition into adulthood.

Endnotes

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