The importance of relationships to children living in residential child care

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Find out more about the importance of relationships to children living in residential child care

Why are relationships important to young people living in residential care?

You must have a good understanding of the importance of relationships to support young people. These relationships could be with young people's families, peers or practitioners.

Children and young people who live in children's homes are among the most vulnerable in society, often with complex and diverse needs. This makes having a support network around them particularly important.

Be aware that the care system itself can make it difficult for young people to form relationships due to frequent changes of social worker, home, school, and often geographical location. The children you're supporting may also be limited in who they can see, or how often they can see them.

However, despite negative experiences in the past, with your help and support young people can learn to develop healthy relationships.

Positive and meaningful relationships are important because they can:

- contribute to children's resilience
- promote physical, mental and emotional well-being
- support positive outcomes
- may help to minimise the risk of forming inappropriate and risky relationships that could lead to exploitation or abuse

- help with therapeutic work.

Positive and meaningful relationships can also support young people's [transition through the care system](#) and when leaving care by:

- enhancing the stability of placements
- influencing permanency planning.

Not forming positive relationships with the children you care for can lead to:

- challenging behaviour
- placement instability
- a continuing cycle of rejection and instability for that child.

Young people have a legal right to maintain relationships

Good relationships for young people in care isn't something for an ideal world; children and young people have a right to family life, and to have friends (freedom of association). [You should be aware of these rights](#) and give young people the opportunities and support they need to maintain important relationships in their lives, as long as it's safe for them.

When children are looked after away from home, their social worker will assess which relationships are safe for them and how children can maintain their links with family and friends, and this should be in their care plan.

Which relationships are important to young people?

Young people have strong views about who they wish to have a relationship with.

Don't make assumptions about which relationships are important to them based on your own expectations or experiences.

You'll find a young person's important relationships recorded in their care plan, which should be updated as relationships evolve and change. If you're helping a young person think about their relationships and they want to change their care plan, then you should discuss this with their social worker before changing anything.

Although family relationships are important, for some children these relationships may have been abusive and chaotic. As such, relationships with friends, carers, professionals or other adults may be extremely important. For some young people a former pet may hold special significance to them.

Useful resources (importance of relationships to children living in res care)

Our work to support children who are looked after

Our chosen or 'curated' research about the number who are looked after

We want your feedback

Help us to improve the Residential child care worker resource by telling us what you think about it in our short four question survey.