



Ending domestic abuse

Constructions and Experiences of Intimate Relationships for Care Experienced People: A Rapid Review of Literature

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Background

In the recent Independent Review of Children's Social Care, the authors state that 'when finding a home for a child in care, our obsession must be putting relationships around them that are loving and lasting' (Independent Review of Children' Social Care, 2022). In the Scottish care review named The Promise, authors emphasised that "above all else the Care Review has heard it is that children want to be loved, and recovery from trauma is often built on a foundation of loving, caring relationships." (The Promise, 2020)

Most of the literature around social connectiveness and relationships for care experienced people has examined the dynamics of care giver-child relationships, with some exploring peer relationships (DeLuca et al., 2019). Less is known about how young people who have been through the care system experience their own intimate relationships, including rates of victimization or perpetuation of intimate partner violence (IPV).

Young people who have been in care are more likely to have experienced high rates of childhood adversity, including family dysfunction, poverty, parental mental health and abuse (Macalister, 2022; Teyhan et al., 2019.) Of the 388,490 children identified as Child in Need in 2021, for 219,190 of them (56%) abuse and neglect was listed as the primary need at assessment. Interestingly, concerns around violence towards the parent was the primary concern at end of assessment in 2021 (Characteristics of Children in Need, 2021). In 2020, it was domestic violence *by* the parent towards the child (Characteristics of Children in Need, 2020).

Whilst evidence suggests that care experienced young people are likely to have exposed to increased levels of violence, little is known about how this, as well as the unique and challenging circumstances of growing up in foster care, residential care or other forms of care placement, may impact the intimate relationships of care experienced people.

The following rapid literature review aims to explore how care experienced people (CEP) conceptualise, seek and experience their own intimate relationships, as well as how they seek support with them. Findings of the review aim to identify key findings and gaps in research, that hope to contribute towards evidence used to design interventions and support around healthy relationships, that are adapted to the needs of the care experienced community.

Methods

To identify relevant research, keyword searches were performed using the PubMed electronic database. Two search terms were chosen, the first identifying the research as having to do with care experienced people, and the second around exploring relationships and relationship abuse. For the first search term, combinations of the following key words were searched for: care-experienced, care leaver, looked-after, foster care, foster child, residential care, out-of-home care, kinship care, adopted. For the second search term, combinations of the following words were searched for: intimate relationship, healthy relationship, causal relationship, sexual relationship, sexual partner, romantic relationship, hook up, domestic abuse, ACE, trauma, positive relationship, harmful behaviour, perpetrator.

Articles were then screened according to further inclusion criteria, including articles that were in English and published in the last ten years. A total of 2,015 titles were identified. All titles were screened for relevance to the research objectives, and 215 articles were selected. In order to refine the search further, articles published in the past 5 years were selected, to leave 129 articles. The abstracts of these articles were then screened. A further 38 articles were identified as having some relevance to the research question. These were used to provide background and supporting evidence to the rapid review. Although these 38 did not all focus on intimate relationships amongst CEP specifically, they provided useful information such as evidence about parent-child relationships, the impact of parenting styles on CEP's mental health, emotional and behavioural attributes, the relationship between adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) and children's internalising symptoms and externalising problems. In total, 9 articles

were identified as being directly linked to the rapid review research objectives. These articles, along with some useful information in other articles, are summarised below.

Findings

The rapid review found a substantial gap in research and evidence relating to the CEP community and behaviours and attitudes towards their intimate relationships. Of the nine studies identified, most were international review of studies, studies carried out North America, one focused on the Spanish context and one on the Italian context.

The review found evidence to suggest that children who have spent time in care are more likely to experience emotional, behavioural and attachment problems across development (Lind et al., 2020). In addition, being have exposed to a larger number of adverse childhood experiences have been associated with higher levels of mental health difficulties (Briggs et al., 2021), and of internalising behaviours (such as depression, anxiety, being withdrawn etc.) and externalising behaviours (such as conduct and attention problems) (Paine et al., 2021). However, how this impacts their trajectories of seeking and behaving in intimate relationships and the factors that impact their relationship trajectories is poorly understood.

Most of the evidence reviewed is grounded in conclusions drawn from either Attachment Theory or Social Learning Theory, both of which establish that social and emotional behaviour is learnt. Disruption in early childhood between care givers and children, is likely to have implications for the child's attachment patterns, in turn impacting their socio-emotional development and social relationships (DeLuca et al., 2019; Katz et al., 2020; Lind et al., 2020).

In terms of relationships and how they contribute to predictors of resilience for care experienced people, parental warmth and interventions aimed at parent-child conflict management have shown to have a positive impact on the social outcomes of care experienced people.

Paine looked at protective factors for children's internalising and externalising behaviours and found that having warm adoptive parents was shown to have a marked reduction in these problems over time (Paine et al., 2021). These findings were mirrored in a recent Italian study of 105 adopted adolescents which highlighted that the quality of parent-child relationship plays a crucial role in guiding the process of identity formation and wellbeing for the adoptees (Ranieri et al., 2021). The Attachment and Biobehavioural Catch-up (ABC) is a parental intervention and that has found to be effective the improving parental sensitivity in foster parents, which has led to children displaying more socially competent and prosocial behaviours in foster children (Lind et al., 2020).

In addition to parental relationships, and more in line with the objectives of this review, some studies also looked at peer relationships, sexual relationships, and romantic relationships. DeLuca et al (2019) conducted a meta-analysis of studies that explore peer relationships for people who have experienced adoption or foster care. They found that adoptees had difficulty forming close peer relationships, but once formed the quality of the relationships is similar to that of their non-adopted peers. For young people in foster care, they reported lower quality peer relationships, likely associated with adjustment in adolescence, including loneliness and internalizing and externalising behaviours (DeLuca et al., 2019).

Several studies look at sexual behavioural and pregnancy of young people in care. There is some evidence to suggest that children in foster care may have higher rates of sexual initiation and pregnancy involvement than those in the general population (Leeds City Council, 2021), and that the number of placement settings were associated with multiple sexual partners and high association of pregnancy involvement (Zhan et al., 2019). A US study of 215 care experienced people found that 49% of the young women had a child by age 21, and 33% of young men reported getting someone pregnant (Combs et al., n.d.). Authors empathized the need for sexual health education and prevention efforts to reach all young people in foster care and call for training for case workers to improve outreach and intervention efforts to ensure reproductive health of young people in care (Combs et al., n.d.).

The review found one study looking at the value of intimate partners for care experienced people. Zinn highlights the importance of social support for foster care youth and the impact that meaningful social connections can have on improving wellbeing outcomes for foster children (Zinn et al., 2017). In a study of 732 foster youth, they found that romantic partners were associated with larger increases in social support than other connections, such as connections through school or employment (Zinn et al., 2017).

The review also found three studies specifically measuring the rates of intimate partner violence amongst young people in care. The findings demonstrate mixed results. Evidence suggests that care experienced youth may be at an increased risk of IPV, but there is weak evidence indicating the extent of this and no literature was found exploring the dynamics, factors and help-seeking behaviours associated with IPV experienced by care experienced youth.

A US study of 151 youths in 'out of home' care found that rates of IPV amongst the foster care sample were almost three times greater than in the population sample (Herrman et al., 2017). Results showed that 36% had been in a relationship where teen dating violence had occurred in the past 12 months (Herrman et al., 2017). However, a study conducted in Spain of 271 minors in out-of-home care, found that 91.5% of adolescents reported having been violent in their relationships at least on in the past year, and 88.6% said they'd experienced victimization in the last year (Dosil, 2019). They found the most common form of violence reported was emotional-verbal violence (89%), followed by physical violence (39%). Finally, Katz argues that due to high rates of parental maltreatment, youth in foster care are considered more vulnerable to intimate partner violence (Katz et al., 2020). Their longitudinal study in the US found that approximately 21% of the young foster care alumni were involved in some type of IPV at age 23/24, with bidirectional violence the most commonly reported form. They argue that "understanding the characteristics and experiences that place these young adults at risk for IPV will allow for more effective and targeted prevention efforts." (Katz et al., 2020)

Conclusion

The results of the review suggest that CEP are more likely to experience emotional, behavioural and attachment difficulties across development, which is likely to impact personal and romantic relationships. In addition, they may be at an increased risk of risky sexual behaviour and perpetration and victimization of IPV. There is large variation in findings relating to the prevalence of IPV amongst care experienced youth. There is currently no national data in the UK measuring this, however the SafeLives Insights dataset will soon produce data measuring the prevalence of CEP in domestic abuse services.

In addition, the review found a substantial gap in evidence around understandings of the relationship dynamics for care experienced youth in intimate relationships. Findings do not build a clear picture of the association between the having been in care and experience of intimate relationships. More evidence is needed to establish how relationships are sought and valued for care experienced people, as well as how they can be best supported by services if experiencing or perpetuating IPV.

Key findings

1. Children who have spent time in care are more likely to experience emotional, behavioural and attachment problems across development, which is likely to impact personal and romantic relationships.
2. There is some evidence to suggest that children in foster care may have higher rates of sexual initiation and youth pregnancy than those in the general population.
3. Care experienced people may be at an increased risk of using harmful behaviours or experiencing harm in their intimate relationships, however the few studies carried out in this area have mixed results and evidence is unclear.
4. Parental warmth and interventions aimed at carer-child conflict management have shown to have a positive impact on the social outcomes of care experienced people.
5. There is a gap in evidence about how care experienced people seek support with their experiences or behaviours in their own intimate relationships.

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