

THE TRANSITION TO ADULTHOOD – THE LIVING SKILLS OF YOUNG PEOPLE IN CARE

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Abstract. The deinstitutionalization of the child care system brought new requirements for social workers when preparing young people to leave care, and new forms of alternative care emerged. However, neither social workers nor those in care were prepared for these changes. The goal of this article is to analyse care leavers' living skills during the transition to adulthood. The article is based on Master Thesis paper. A qualitative research method using non-probability judgmental sampling was applied. Five social workers that provide leaving care support services were interviewed. Thematic data analysis revealed five subthemes: domestic skills, being part of society, financial planning skills, confidence, and decision-making. Social workers emphasized that for a smooth transition to adulthood, care leavers need to have skills that will help them to achieve good outcomes. These skills include those of a domestic nature: cooking, cleaning, doing the dishes, and other abilities will make care leavers feel independent, first of all, from social workers. However, not only domestic living skills are needed; social workers also explain that care leavers need to know how to be part of society without feeling like they do not belong. Care leavers have also been described as needing confidence, decision-making and financial planning skills. Together, these skills make care leavers' transition to adulthood successful.

Keywords: young people in care; independent and interdependent living skills; transition to adulthood; emerging adulthood theory.

Introduction

For young people, the departure from the family setting to independent living is a significant challenge. This challenge is even more significant for those who are living in alternative care settings due to a lack of family support in their transition to adulthood.¹ In the EU, approximately 1 million children live in alternative care, and a large number of them leave care every year.² In Lithuania, an average of 370 young people leave alternative care each year to live on their own because they have attained the age of majority.³

The transition to adulthood after leaving care is complicated for young people because they are less ready for independent living due to having lived in institutional settings.⁴ Despite not being ready for adulthood and independent living, care leavers have to take the responsibilities that come with adulthood in a short and accelerated time,⁵ unlike their peers who were not in care and can assume adult responsibilities gradually.⁶ As a result, care leavers are particularly vulnerable, and studies have shown them to have poorer outcomes: they are two to four times more likely to suffer from mental health disorders and substance abuse than non-placed young people, respectively⁷; they have the highest risk of social

1 Sulimani-Aidan Y. "Care leavers' challenges in transition to independent living". *Children and Youth Services Review* 46 (2014): 38-46.

2 Eurochild. *National Surveys on Children in Alternative Care: Executive Summary* (Brussels, 2010.).

3 "Number of children in child care institutions and families by sex". Statistics Lithuania. Accessed July 10, 2020 <https://osp.stat.gov.lt/EN/statistiniu-rodikliu-analize?hash=e212da1b-2491-46d2-ab8a-2a260a3878c5#/>.

4 Benbenisty R and Schiff M. "Perceptions of readiness to leave care among adolescents in foster care in Israel". *Children and Youth Services Review* 31, 6 (2009): 662-669.

5 Stein M. "Resilience and Young People Leaving Care." *Child Care in Practice* 14, 1 (2007): 35-44.

6 Sulimani-Aidan, op.cit., 38-46.

7 Haggman-Laitila A., Salokekkila P., and Karki S. "Transition to adult life of young people leaving foster care: A qualitative systematic review". *Children and Youth Services Review* 95, (2018): 134-143.

exclusion as adults⁸; and they are more likely to be recruited into criminal gangs, where they may suffer abuse and exploitation.⁹ These risks can, however, be reduced through the development and provision of support, which starts while they are still in care and extends to when they leave care and transition to adulthood.¹⁰ Many studies have concluded that care leavers need holistic support. This suggests a combination of different activities for physical and psychosocial health, as well as in different life domains such as employment, education, economics and accommodation.¹¹

The United Nations (2010) Guidelines for the Alternative Care of Children recommend that childcare agencies and facilities should have a clear policy on support for aftercare and follow-up in the transition of care leavers. With regards to these guidelines, the government of Lithuania developed the Action Plan on the Transition from Institutional Care to Family and Community Services for Disabled Persons and Children Without Parental Care 2014–2020. This Action Plan highlights the necessary steps to be taken in Lithuania regarding the services provided to children without parental care and support for their guardians and carers.¹²

The above-mentioned transitional support is provided by program staff and social workers involved with those leaving care. They are the moderators of these support services and are responsible for the success of all support interventions for those leaving care. These human service professionals help care leavers understand what living independently truly is.¹³ They are also there every step of

8 Jackson S., and Cameron C. “Leaving Care: Looking ahead and aiming higher”. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 34, 6 (2012): 1107-1114.

9 Sakaliene D., and Pleckeveciene V. *Rights of the child in Lithuania: NGO. Report for the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child* (Vilnius, 2012).

10 Benbenisty and Schiff, *supra note*, 4: 662-669.

11 Häggman-Laitila, Salohekkilä and Karki, *supra note*, 7: 63-77.

12 “Order Concerning Approval of An Action Plan on the Transition from Institutional Care to Family and Community Services for Persons and Children Without Parental Care for 2014-2020”. Ministry of Social Security and Labour, 2014.

13 Häggman-Laitila, Salohekkilä and Karki, *supra note*, 11: 63-77.

the way to serve as independent living coaches and encourage young people to join the community, as this is associated with positive outcomes for care leavers.¹⁴

The **goal** of this article is to analyze care leavers' living skills in the transition to adulthood. The article is based on Master Thesis paper by interpreting analyzed data from a new perspective.

The **objects** of the study are the living skills of care leavers.

The **methods** used in this study include qualitative research using non-probability judgmental sampling. Five social workers that provide leaving care support services were interviewed. Thematic data analysis then revealed five subthemes: domestic skills, being part of society, financial planning skills, confidence, and decision-making. Emerging adulthood theory, a leading theoretical approach for the better understanding of data such as this, was also employed in this study.

1. Emerging adulthood theory

Emerging adulthood theory, proposed by Arnett,¹⁵ describes the phase of life between adolescence and full adulthood. Arnett described this period as not simply an extended adolescence, but as a different period from adolescence, where young people are much freer from parental control. Therefore, it is a period of independent exploration. It is also not young adulthood, because most young people have not yet made the transitions historically associated with adult status – namely, marriage and parenthood. This period involves those aged from eighteen to twenty-five, and it has features different in important ways from the preceding period of adolescence. It is an age at which young people feel in transition, as they are neither an adolescent nor an adult. At the same time, it is an age of endless possibilities, where young people have the opportunity to transform their lives. A

14 Sinkkonen H.M., Kyattala M. "Supportive Housing in Foster Care: The Views of Young People". *Child Care in Practice* 21, 4 (2015): 408-424.

15 Arnett J. J. "Emerging Adulthood: What Is It, and What Is It Good For?". *Child Development Perspectives* 1,2 (2007): 68-73.

notable characteristic of this period is that it offers the best opportunity for self-exploration and focus.¹⁶ Focusing on themselves helps emerging adults to develop daily living skills and better understand who they are and what they want from life, thereby building a foundation for their adult lives. This serves to meet their goal of self-sufficiency, but they also have space to make their own decisions. Even though they leave their families of origin, their families still continue to act as a source of financial and practical support, as well as being a source of guidance and wisdom. They then carry their familial influences with them when they leave home, regardless of their family background.¹⁷

For care leavers, the transition to adulthood is a period of anxiety and uncertainty due to them feeling unsettled. Even though this is a period in which they are freer than they have ever been since they were children, they still struggle with uncertainty due to feeling like doors have closed on them and they have no more possibilities. There is an assumption that care leavers have limited opportunities and do not experience the benefits of emerging adulthood. They have limited time and space for self-exploration because they have limited family support networks, and have to support themselves financially. They also experience significant instability in employment and accommodation, and often have only themselves to rely on – unlike many young adults their age, who are able to lean on their parents when the need arises.¹⁸ Care leavers must assume independence immediately after they leave care, and this is an abrupt and accelerated transition. They are often not ready for this transition and lack the necessary support.¹⁹ As a result, they are considerably more disadvantaged and vulnerable because they have limited possibilities and opportunities, and these are a constraint on their

16 Sulimani-Aidan, and Melkman, *supra note*, 1:135-140.

17 Arnett, *supra note*, 15: 68-73.

18 Sulimani-Aidan, Melkman, *supra note*, 1:135-140.

19 Stein, *supra note*, 5: 422-434.

future plans and hopes.²⁰ Although care leavers may face challenges as they emerge into adulthood, this period also holds potential advantages for them. This is because – even though state support ends rather abruptly, sending them into the harsh realities of adult life – they remain in a situation in which they have great potential for responsibility, skills development, and self-understanding, with far greater potential for these benefits than when they were adolescents.²¹

2. Independent and interdependent living skills

Care leavers, like all young people who are transitioning to adulthood, have common needs of employment, financial independence, independent living skills, building and maintaining support systems, and becoming contributing members of the larger community.²² However, for care leavers, this transition is more complicated. Often, they do not receive extra support from their biological families, relationships with which are stressful as a result of past experiences. They do not have safe spaces to return to if necessary, and as a result they need additional support in their transition to adulthood.²³ This transitional period may impact how care leavers cope later in their independent lives.²⁴

Shin²⁵ suggested that independent living skills training should be the main child welfare service for helping young people who are about to exit care. In the scoping review for SOS Children's Village, care leavers stressed the importance of being prepared for leaving care through the acquisition of practical skills that leavers might need for independent life. Cooking and cleaning, budgeting, and

20 Sulimani-Aidan, Melkman, *supra note*, 1:135-140.

21 Arnett, *supra note*, 15: 68-73.

22 Loring J. "The Impact of Transitional Housing on the Post-Discharge Functioning of Former Foster Youth". *Residential Treatment for Children and Youth* 28, 1 (2011): 17-38.

23 Häggman-Laitila, Saloekkilä and Karki, *supra note*, 11: 63-77.

24 Sulimani-Aidan Y. "Care leavers' challenges in transition to independent living". *Children and Youth Services Review* 46 (2014): 38-46.

25 Shin H.S. "Improving Social Work Practice with Foster Adolescents: Examining Readiness for Independence". *Journal of Public Child Welfare* 3, 4 (2009): 354-371.

taking care of their own health were at the top of this list of skills, and it was also emphasized that carers should provide advice about how to access entitlements, accommodation, educational opportunities and work.²⁶ Shin's²⁷ study, involving 152 young people in care, found that the preparation of foster youth for independent living takes a significant amount of planning and effort. While trying to answer what care leavers need, Daly²⁸ interviewed care workers and care leavers, who outlined the need to master practical everyday tasks such as making meals, doing laundry, planning a journey, and financial skills – particularly budgeting. Most participants in a study by Paulsen and Berg²⁹ reported the necessity of economic guidance in their daily lives.

The findings of research by Frimpong-Manso³⁰ add another dimension to the preparation of care leavers through supporting them in the development of living skills. This study emphasizes that the preparation of those leaving care should focus on helping develop not only independent skills, but also interdependent living skills – including fostering help-seeking attitudes in order to aid care leavers' ability to create a social support network. Even though care leavers need to have a certain level of independence, there is also a need for them to know how to ask for help. Paulsen and Berg³¹ refer to this as a “both-and” approach, where there is a recognition of this balance between “independency” and “dependency” amongst care leavers who are both independent and dependent at the same time.

26 SOS Children's Villages. *Prepare for Leaving Care: Practice Guidance*. Vilnius: Tarptautinė SOS vaikų kaimų organizacija, 2017.

27 Shin, *supra note*, 25: 354-371.

28 Daly F. “What do Young People Need When They Leave Care? Views of Care-leavers and Aftercare Workers in North Dublin Fiona”. *Child Care in Practice* 18, 4 (2012): 309-324.

29 Paulsen V., Berg B. “Social support and interdependency in transition to adulthood from child welfare services”. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 68 (2016): 132-131

30 Frimpong-Manso K. “Stories of Care Leaving: The Experiences of a Group of Resilient Young Adults on Their Journey to Interdependent Living in Ghana”. *Emerging Adulthood* 8, 1 (2020): 16-25.

31 Paulsen, Berg, *op. cit.*, 132-131.

Storø³² describes interdependence as being part of supportive networks where people exchange with each other reciprocally, and outlines two levels: the first entails close relationships to friends and family; the second concerns a citizen who is connected with other citizens by participating in society. According to this concept, sharing, helping and receiving help and other forms of social exchange with other people are good values.

In their findings, Pryce, Napolitano, and Samuels³³ concluded that children are taught different types of help-seeking behavior from their carers through explicit instruction or by behavior modeling. Young people who have left care acknowledged that additional assistance is essential for their growth and success.

There is a need to invest in children in alternative care in order to include their communities and networks in a fluid way so that the care system can promote a healthy reliance on a broader range of people. It is also key to emphasize seeking and obtaining help both while in care and after leaving the care system. One way to do so is through the provision of opportunities for young people in care to practice seeking and securing the help they need by supporting relationships between them and the adults that they are in close proximity to while in care.

3. Research methodology

Qualitative research was applied in this study to help the researcher explore and understand the subject matter from the perspective of those being studied. The use of qualitative research gave depth and richness as it involved the personal experiences of social workers who work with care leavers.

Non-probability judgmental sampling was used, applying the following criteria to social workers: (1) those who work in institutions that provide leaving

32 Storø J. "To manage on one's own after leaving care? A discussion of the concepts independence versus interdependence". *Nordic Social Work Research* 8 (2018): 104-115.

33 Pryce J., Napolitano L., Samuels G. "Transition to Adulthood of Former Foster Youth: Multilevel Challenges to the Help-Seeking Process Julia". *Emerging Adulthood* 5, 5 (2017): 311-321.

care services in Lithuania; and (2) those who work with young people about to leave care or who have left care. This gave first-hand information regarding the experiences of “front line” workers. Contact was made with five social workers in Lithuania who scheduled Skype calls. Four of the participants were female and one male. This sample size was chosen in order to give the researcher the opportunity to be fully immersed in the study and to establish good relationships with research participants in order to address the research problem in a more in-depth manner. Saturation was used as a criterion for discontinuing the collection of data for analysis.³⁴

This research applied the semi-structured interview method of data collection. The data was analyzed using thematic analysis, which is known as a process for identifying patterns or thematic areas within qualitative data.³⁵ The interview transcripts were read multiple times and then coded. There were no pre-set codes; instead, the codes were developed and modified as the coding process continued.

The main ethical considerations of qualitative research were followed. Confidentiality was ensured and informed consent was articulated. It was specified to the participants in advance what they would be asked to do in the research. They were made aware well in advance of what data would be collected and how the data would be used.³⁶

4. The living skills needed for transition

The thematic area of the living skills needed for transition consists of the following subthemes: domestic skills, being part of society, financial planning skills,

34 Saunders B., Sim J., Kingstone T., Baker S., Waterfield J., Bartlam B., and Jinks C. “Saturation in qualitative research: exploring its conceptualization and operationalization”. *Quality and Quantity* 52, 4 (2018): 1893-1907.

35 Maguire M., Delahunt B. “Doing a Thematic Analysis: A Practical, Step-by-Step Guide for Learning and Teaching Scholars”. *All Ireland Journal of Higher Education* 9, 3 (2017): 3351-33514.

36 Bahramnezhad, F., Sanjari, M., Fomani, F. K., Shoghi, M., and Cheraghi, M. A. “Ethical Challenges of researchers in qualitative studies: the necessity to develop a specific guideline”. *Journal of Medical Ethics and History of Medicine* 7, (2014): 1-6.

confidence, and decision-making.

In their work with care leavers, the social workers identified domestic skills as necessary for care leavers' transition to adulthood. Care leavers need to know how to live their regular day-to-day lives without their carers. The possession of these skills – including, cleaning, cooking, laundry, etc. – in a care leaver was described as a major ingredient for a successful transition to adulthood:

“I need to mention that a successful transition from care to independence is also when the youngster can take care of themselves: when they can make some kind of dish, when they know that they have to do laundry, when they can go to the grocery shop and spend their money wisely, when they are not afraid to ask questions, when they can go to an ATM and know how to use it” (JT).

Additionally, when describing a “successfully transitioned” care leaver, one social worker added that when care leavers have used their learned life skills to secure a home and a job/education, then they will not need social workers anymore:

“When they have their own strong life – for example if they are still studying, they have work, or they have a place to live – we say that they are grown-up and they don't need us anymore” (KJ).

However, it is not just domestic living skills that are important. Care leavers need to know how to be part of wider society in order for them to feel like any other person and not be afraid in social situations:

“To take full part in a society and not to feel different from others, I think that is success” (EV); “...and they can also learn how to behave in the, you know, in the society with other people, because usually they are also afraid of people and they are always trying not to communicate with people” (MS).

Using a story of one young person selling a fridge, social workers described care leavers as lacking skills in financial planning and management:

“For example, one youngster bought a fridge from their money. After that, he sold it for three euros. And he said: ‘Oh, look what a lot of money I got from the

fridge.’ So, it was like, whoa! Three euros for a new fridge!’ (EV).

According to the research participants, care leavers need to know how to make good financial decisions that include planning so as not to run out of money for rent and food. When asked to describe a care leaver who has “successfully” transitioned to independence, the response concerned financial management:

“The youngster who can clearly plan their money so that at the end of the month they can have money for rent or food” (KJ).

Social workers have described care leavers as not having any confidence: *“... they don’t trust themselves”* (IG).

Moreover, they constantly feel guilty about things that are no fault of their own: *“Let me say, they have this guilt ...they are connecting it, that it’s their fault, like something is wrong with them and no one can hear them, and no one is interested in them”* (MS).

Another skill required by care leavers, as described by social workers, is the need to make decisions independently. This was described as difficult but necessary for a successful transition to adulthood, with one respondent replying to the question of what defines a successful transition as follows: *“I think that it’s the youngster who can make decisions by themselves”* (KJ).

This decision-making ability will lead to care leavers explicitly knowing what it is that they want in life, and the way to get there: *“And if a person knows clearly what they want to do in life, I find that that is a really tough part of living independently and making decisions and knowing what you want, what you do and what for”* (EV).

In summary, the social workers explained that in order for care leavers to transition to adulthood, they need to have skills that will help them achieve good outcomes. Care leavers have been described by social workers as needing domestic skills: cooking, cleaning, and doing the dishes. These domestic skills will make them feel independent of the social workers with whom they work. However, not

only domestic living skills are needed; social workers explain that care leavers need to know how to be part of society without feeling like they do not belong. Care leavers have also been described as needing confidence, decision-making, and financial planning skills. According to the social workers, all of these skills together will benefit care leavers to aid in a successful transition to adulthood.

5. Discussion

The role of social workers in supporting the transition of care leavers is defined as the responsibility of making sure that care leavers get to the point where they “do not need them” any longer. This is achieved through the acquisition of independent and interdependent living skills, which can be achieved through the support and guidance of their social workers. According to these findings, this guidance involves showing them how to do things better and supporting them to make the right decisions, realize the consequences of their decisions, and not give up. At the same time, the social workers recognize that they do not tell care leavers what to do, as their relationship is not based on hierarchy but begins from a level field. The research participants described themselves as being akin to lighthouses that show care leavers the way. This role of social workers for care leavers has also been emphasized in other research projects undertaken in the country.

The social workers observed that care leavers lack confidence, and noted that all of the tasks and roles of social workers will inadvertently lead to the building of the confidence of care leavers. Sulimani-Aidan³⁷ connects this to improving resilience; working with care leavers to build a positive perception of themselves by paying attention to their abilities and strengths will help in increasing their resilience.

The research participants also described care leavers as having insufficient decision-making skills. Research regarding decision-making among care leavers has

37 Sulimani-Aidan, and Melkman, *supra note*, 1:135-140.

shown that they do not know how to make decisions because they had nobody to teach them. As a result, they learnt how to make decisions by making mistakes. Additionally, during their time in care, they were required to make quick decisions, and therefore did not learn how to think before making a choice. Making decisions is important for care leaver's self-esteem and confidence; it may give them the sense of being active agents in relation to their own care, rather than powerless victims.³⁸

Knowing how to make decisions is a skill that care leavers can use in different parts of their lives. The research participants described care leavers as not knowing how to make good financial decisions, leading to poor financial management. Such findings have consistently been documented by practitioners and researchers³⁹ in the country. Care leavers have financial issues because they no longer have access to grants from the government after they leave care, and at the same time they face additional costs such as paying for health services and further education. As a result, they often find themselves on public assistance more often than young people who were never in care.

When care leavers are able to gain skills, they can apply those skills in other areas of their lives. Social workers teach care leavers the necessary skills for their transition to adulthood, but it is equally important that care leavers are involved in learning these skills so that they can learn by doing. In doing this, not only are social workers carrying out their roles as guides, teachers and supporters, but they are also putting care leavers at the forefront of their transitions.

Conclusions

When social workers develop quality relationships with care leavers, they can act as mentors and provide a therapeutic environment for care leavers where they

38 SOS Children's Villages, *supra note*, 26: 16.

39 Raudeliūnaitė R., Gudžinskienė V., "The Development of Independent Living Skills in Children at Community Children's Care Home: the Analysis of Children's Experiences". *Pedagogika* 145, 1 (2022): 233–257.

feel comfortable to express themselves. Social workers can understand care leavers and are able to teach them the skills that will aid them in their transition to adulthood. Social workers act as a source of support, guidance and motivation for care leavers. This is the primary way that they can help them attain the skills and competencies needed for their transition to adulthood. They help care leavers learn how to take care of themselves, how to be part of society, and how to be confident. Having these skills will allow care leavers to feel good about themselves and also be part of a support network. These are all shown to be protective factors that will increase care leavers' resilience.

Emerging adults need to learn certain skills in order to be independent, and while the acquisition of these skills for care leavers often comes through their careers, it is important for them to learn through practice. Research shows that social workers still have to teach care leavers a plethora of skills despite them becoming adults at the age of eighteen. Social workers consult care leavers and work with them to develop their skills. Such skills, using the example of decision-making, can be used across all parts of their lives, such as when managing their finances. Social workers guide care leavers to make these decisions by allowing them to participate in decision-making on issues related to their transition. In so doing, social workers can ensure that care leavers learn by doing.

PERĖJIMAS Į SUAUGUSIŲJŲ GYVENIMĄ – GLOBOJAMO JAUNIMO SAVARANKIŠKO GYVENIMO ĮGŪDŽIAI

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Santrauka. Vaikų globos sistemos deinstitutionalizavimas išskėlė naujus reikalavimus socialiniams darbuotojams rengiant jaunuolius išeiti iš globos sistemos. Atsirado naujų alternatyvios globos formų. Tačiau nei socialiniai darbuotojai, nei globos įstaigų jaunimas nebuvo pasirengę šiems pokyčiams. Straipsnio tikslas – išanalizuoti globos namų auklėtinių gyvenimo įgūdžius pereinant į suaugusiųjų gyvenimą. Taikytas kokybinis tyrimas naudojant netikimybinę tikslinę atranką. Interviu metu kalbėta su penkiais socialiniais darbuotojais, dirbančiais su iš globos išeinančiais jaunuoliais. Teminė duomenų analizė atskleidė penkias temas: būtiniai įgūdžiai, buvimas visuomenės dalimi, finansų planavimo įgūdžiai, pasitikėjimas savimi ir sprendimų priėmimas. Socialiniai darbuotojai pabrėžė, kad, norint sklandžiai pereiti į suaugusiųjų gyvenimą, globos įstaigas paliekantiems asmenims reikia turėti įgūdžių, kurie padėtų pasiekti gerų rezultatų. Socialiniai darbuotojai apibūdino, kad jiems pirmiausia reikia buitinių įgūdžių: maisto gaminimo, valymo, indų plovimo, t. y. to, kas padėtų jiems jaustis nepriklausomiems. Tačiau reikia ne tik buitinių įgūdžių; socialiniai darbuotojai aiškina, kad globos netekusiems asmenims reikia žinoti, kaip būti ir jaustis visuomenės dalimi. Globos namų auklėtiniai taip pat apibūdinami kaip asmenys, kuriems reikia pasitikėjimo savimi, sprendimų priėmimo ir finansų planavimo įgūdžių. Visi šie įgūdžiai kartu padėtų globoje esantiems jaunuoliams sėkmingai pereiti į savarankišką suaugusiųjų gyvenimą.

Reikšminiai žodžiai: jaunimas globoje; savarankiško gyvenimo įgūdžiai; perėjimas į suaugusiojo amžių; besiformuojančios pilnametystės / brandos teorija.

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