

Early education as an intervention for children looked after

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International Journal of Birth and Parent Education Vol. 5 Issue 2, January 2018

Final version submitted prior to review and copy editing

Of the more than 70,000 children in care of the state in England, approximately one fifth are under the age of five. These young 'children looked after' (CLA) are placed largely in foster or kinship care. Many experience significant early adversity prior to entering care, leading to poorer educational, socio-emotional, and health outcomes which have implications throughout their life trajectory (Mathers et al., 2016). Government data show that CLA have poorer educational outcomes than children not in care throughout primary and secondary school, with the gap widening as children get older. Beyond compulsory education, just seven per cent of care-leavers in England progressed to higher education in 2014, compared with 50% of the general population aged 17 to 30 (DfE, 2014). Although the focus is often on school outcomes and beyond, evidence suggests that CLA are already behind in their language, psycho-social and neuro-psychological functioning before the age of five, and have poorer academic and socio-emotional competence upon entry to school (Pears & Fisher, 2005). There is, therefore, a strong case for early intervention to ensure that children can reach their full potential. Young CLA need early years environments which help them to develop secure attachments, socio-emotional skills, inhibitory control and language skills, as well as supporting health and psychological needs. Learning must also be supported alongside social and emotional needs (Cameron et al., 2015).

Contexts for early intervention

The two primary contexts for early intervention are the home environment, and early education and care settings such as nursery schools, pre-schools and childminding provision. Undoubtedly, the most important of these is the home care environment. The carer's role in providing a nurturing, sensitive and stable environment is a crucial factor in helping CLA to overcome early adversity, for example in promoting attachment security, emotional adjustment and adjustment to school (Lang et al., 2016; Healey & Fisher, 2011). Since the home learning environment is a stronger predictor of children's developmental progress than either pre-school or school quality, carers also have an important role to play in supporting home learning (Cameron et al., 2015; Sylva et al., 2010).

We also know that early education benefits children's cognitive, language and social development, school success, employment and social integration (Melhuish et al., 2015). There is strong evidence that attending early years provision can help children facing early adversity to catch up with their peers (e.g. Sylva et al., 2010). In fact, the effects of good quality early childhood provision have been found to be *stronger* for disadvantaged children than for their more advantaged peers, acting as a protective buffer against the detrimental effects of poor home environments (Berry et al., 2016). Although there is little CLA-specific research, such studies indicate the potential of early years provision to act as a protective intervention for children in care (Meloy & Phillips, 2012), and one recent study which did focus specifically on young fostered children confirms that attendance can predict better cognitive outcomes in primary school (Kaiser et al., 2011). This paper focuses on the potential of early education as an early intervention for CLA, drawing on a recent small-scale English research study funded by the Nuffield Foundation (Mathers et al., 2016) and focusing particularly on implications for carers of young CLA. The 'Starting Out Right' study comprised a purposive review of relevant research literature; interviews with a range of experts and a short online survey of English local authorities.

Intervention through early education

The Starting Out Right interviewees echoed the research literature, confirming the importance of early education, and that learning should be supported alongside other needs. Interviewees considered early years provision to add value over and above the home care environment in a number of ways, including opportunities to mix with peers; support with speech, language and learning; and personal care routines such as toileting and healthy eating behaviours. Opportunities for children to experience social and structured play were particularly valued by foster carers, who highlighted the importance of CLA 'learning how to learn' so that they could access the learning opportunities available to them, both in preschool and in school.

"I think it's really important because they've often missed out on so much at home, a lot of them have been neglected as well as other kinds of trauma..... Foster carers, we can give input but I think you get a different perspective in a pre-school because it helps with their social skills, which a lot of them don't have. So I think it's really beneficial for them in terms of their social skills and just learning by observing other children how to play, even. So they learn how to play, they learn how to interact with other children, and the other stuff comes out of that. When the emotional and the social skills develop and they become more secure and settled, then the academic stuff comes too. And then they're ... getting to feel like they are normal kids and not different."

Foster carer, Hampshire

"They're very young... there really aren't a lot of interventions we can deploy. So the interventions are about promoting an environment which stimulates development. ... I usually do it with early years provision. There's something magic about nursery in particular around speech and language development"

**Dr Doug Simkiss, Consultant Paediatrician and
Designated Doctor for LAC in Birmingham**

In addition to direct benefits for children, there is some evidence that their attendance at free early education can bring benefits for carers, and reduce the risk of placement breakdown during the preschool years (Meloy & Phillips, 2012).

However, simply attending is not enough: the features of early education provision also matter. Evidence suggests that, due to their unique risk profile, CLA may be more sensitive to variation in provision, particularly in relation to quality and stability. In broad population studies, the benefits of early education are known to be more significant and more sustained if that provision is of good quality (Sylva et al., 2010). Low quality provision can have minimal or even negative impacts, and represents a double disadvantage for children already at risk of developmental delay (Melhuish et al., 2015; Phillips & Lowenstein, 2011). Continuity of experience is also important: Pears and Fisher (2005) found that children who moved their education placement more often tended to have lower socio-emotional competence than their peers. For children who began kindergarten with poorer outcomes, this instability mediated the effect of maltreatment and foster placement on later socio-emotional competence - that is, changing education settings was one of the drivers for children's poorer outcomes. This indicates that moves between preschool settings should be minimised where possible, and highlights a need for children to be supported to cope with any transitions which do take place. Finally, it is important that carers are involved with their child's educational setting, with evidence that this may mediate the effect of maltreatment and foster placement on later socio-emotional competence (Pears et al., 2010).

Are young CLA in England accessing good quality early education?

Policy in England prioritises the rights of CLA to access good quality early education and emphasises their learning needs. All CLA are eligible for free early education from the age of two years, and providers catering for disadvantaged young children can access an early years 'pupil premium' to help meet their needs more effectively. All local authorities employ a Virtual School Head (VSH) who is responsible for promoting the educational achievement of CLA, including monitoring and tracking their progress and overseeing the statutory requirement for each child to have a Personal Education Plan (PEP) as part of their care plan.

However, a survey of local authorities conducted as part of Starting Out Right suggests that take-up of free early education places by CLA aged two-to-four years is at least 14 percent lower than take-up in the general population, and the authors propose that this may be an underestimate (Mathers at al., 2016). Although this may in part be the result of sensitive and informed decisions being made to delay entry to early education in the best interest of the child, findings from the interviews also indicate a number of barriers to take-up which need to be addressed.

The awareness and attitudes of social workers and carers were considered to represent a barrier to access in some cases. While many foster carers were seen to value and prioritise early education provision, interviewees also reported that some carers and social workers prioritised emotional support and relationship-building in the home above skills development and school readiness, leading to some children missing out on early education opportunities which would have been appropriate for them.

"There's an enduring ideology amongst social workers, and that trickles down, that you need to attend to the emotions before you attend to the learning.... There are lots of things you can do to soften the edges between care and education (educating foster carers and making settings more flexible and welcoming for young children) but it's a false dichotomy in my view to say that you can't be in a formal setting and learning until your emotions are sorted out."

Claire Cameron, Professor of Social Pedagogy, UCL Thomas Coram Research Unit

Other barriers included a lack of awareness of the opportunities and local resources that might be available to the child, and foster carer's confidence in engaging with the education system. This highlights the importance of raising awareness among foster carers and social workers of the potential benefits of early education.

Practical barriers faced by carers in accessing early education for their children included the need to attend frequent appointments, the high prevalence of physical health problems requiring professional intervention, and difficulties in finding appropriate provision for children with potentially challenging needs. The temporary nature of care placements may act as a further disincentive to accessing early years provision, particularly in relation to the often short-term foster placements of very young CLA. Interviewees reported that opportunities to provide more extensive educational support are sometimes being delayed with the expectation that these needs can be addressed once children take up a school place.

When CLA do access early education provision, the local authority survey suggested that the majority (89 per cent) attend settings rated by Ofsted as 'good' or 'outstanding'; a figure broadly comparable to their non-looked-after peers. However, while Ofsted ratings do indicate a setting's general capacity to meet children's needs, they provide a very broad-brush measure of 'quality'. When compared with robust observational research measures of quality, Ofsted ratings show only a modest correlation with the ratings of an external assessor (Mathers, Singler & Karemaker, 2012). Neither do they provide a sense of the individual experiences of CLA accessing early education, or

the extent to which providers are able to meet their specific needs. Study findings suggest that this requires qualified and experienced practitioners with a deep understanding of attachment and the consequences of early trauma and neglect; experience working with young LAC; and the knowledge and skills to meet a potentially broad range of emotional, educational and health needs.

The early education settings involved in Starting Out Right provided excellent examples of good practice in meeting the needs of young CLA. However findings suggest that many providers do not have the knowledge and expertise required to do this effectively. Interviewees also reported variable awareness among foster carers and social workers about the importance of quality, resulting in some decisions being made on the basis of convenience and accessibility rather than quality. Given that quality is particularly important for children at risk, it is vital that foster carers and social workers understand the importance and the characteristics of quality to enable informed choice and that carers are supported in finding good quality early education provision, using more nuanced criteria than Ofsted grades can provide. CLA's need for continuity must also be considered alongside their need for good quality provision, and local authority interviewees noted examples of tensions between these two factors, for example where a child is already attending a setting on entry to care which may not be of the highest quality. Study findings highlighted the need for decision-making regarding CLA to be carried out in a highly individualised way, taking into account all needs across all areas of development and involving input from, and professional collaboration between, foster carers and education, social care and health teams.

How involved are carers with early education settings?

Research evidence suggests that foster carers are generally less involved in children's schooling than the birth parents of non-fostered children (Pears et al., 2010), so efforts to promote involvement are of particular importance. All the early years settings interviewed as part of Starting Out Right cited support for carers and families as a central part of their role. In many cases support was very practical, ranging from impromptu meetings and discussions with carers or cover for one-off events such as court appearances, to increasing the number of sessions available when carers were having difficulty or (in one case) offering free full-time places to support carers.

"I think if you work with a good nursery they are more accommodating for looked after children, that's my experience. They will really try to help out and to sort something out, they don't insist that they have six weeks' notice because they know it's not feasible. As soon as I know about any change I let them know that this is happening. When I get a child, if we are waiting for a place they do try very hard to be accommodating for the child. The staff have been through training, they have put a key worker in the older section for looked after children and in the younger section of the nursery. It's a family-run business, they are very good.

Many providers considered themselves to be working as closely with families as with the children, priding themselves on the strong and supportive relationships developed. Where resources allowed – primarily in the nursery schools - home visits were a central part of their support for CLA and their families, with one setting also offering a support group for families. Others offered support in developing the home learning environment, gave time and attention to communication about children's needs and progress, and actively facilitated relationships between, for example, fostering and adoptive families. Given that Starting Out Right involved settings identified as reflecting good practice, it will be important to establish the extent to which such close working with carers and families is widespread, and work to ensure that all providers have both the expertise and the resources needed to offer this.

How effective are local authorities at supporting access to good quality early education?

The Starting Out Right local authorities had a range of strategies in place to support accessibility, quality and continuity of early years experiences for CLA. Virtual schools were at heart of these efforts, and a number local authorities involved in the research had a designated representative responsible for overseeing the educational needs of CLA younger than statutory school age, either within the virtual school or as part of the early years team.

These early years leads worked to raise awareness of the availability and importance of early education among foster carers and social workers, particularly as part of a wider drive to increase take-up of the two-year-old offer. Some actively monitored young children coming into care and brokered their access to a good quality early education place. Once children started at an early education setting, early years leads worked alongside social workers to facilitate communication between carers and settings, ensuring that staff had the information they needed to support CLA, and that carers were aware of what settings can and should provide. For example, settings in York receive a 'fact file' on each new CLA, completed by the social worker and foster carer and facilitated by the local authority. This confidential document contains information about the child's background, interests, needs and potential trigger points. Early years CLA leads also convened and/or chaired meetings about children's Personal Education Plans, supported effective monitoring of progress via the PEP, and worked alongside local authority early years teams to support settings in meeting children's needs effectively. Finally, some local authorities provided direct training and support for foster carers in offering a rich home learning environment.

However findings from Starting Out Right suggest that such practices are not widespread and that further improvements could be made to ensure young CLA's access to good quality early education experiences. At policy level, this would be supported by extending the remit of virtual schools to include explicit responsibility for monitoring and supporting the educational progress of LAC prior to school age. It would also be valuable to extend the practice of designating a specific early years lead within local authority virtual schools more widely. Although the local authority survey suggests that at least 15 responding authorities had a designated early years lead, this does not yet appear to be standard practice. Significant improvements could also be made in local authority data collection and monitoring to support CLA's access to high quality early education provision. Finally, Starting Out Right identified challenges relating to children attending care placements in a different local authority area (out of borough). Currently, many boroughs are not aware of CLA that have been placed in their area, and the placing borough may not be aware of the best providers and available services to support children's early education.

To conclude, the Starting Out Right study confirmed the significant potential of early education to act as an early intervention for children in care, although further robust and CLA-specific research is still urgently needed. Implications for policy and practice include:

- **For foster and kinship carers:** to prioritise the learning needs of children in their care, both at home and through access to high quality early education provision.
- **For local authority virtual schools, early years and social care teams:**
 - to support carers in accessing high quality early education provision for all CLA, including those placed out of borough, as part of a coherent decision-making approach to meeting children's needs involving input from education, social care and health teams;
 - in support of the above, to designate an early years CLA lead and ensure that data collection and monitoring are adequate to support CLA's access to high quality early education provision and their educational achievement;

- to ensure that early education providers are prepared and supported to meet the needs of young CLA and their carers.
- **For policymakers at national level:** to extend the remit of virtual schools to include explicit responsibility for CLA prior to school age, and ensure that early years providers have adequate funds to meet the potentially significant needs of CLA.

KEYWORDS

1. Early education and care
2. Children looked after (CLA)
3. Foster care/ fostered children
4. Early intervention
5. Home learning environment

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