

Breaking the cycle

Taking responsibility for independence

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Young people in care need assistance to develop the skills and support networks necessary for successful independence. The Transition from Care Program was developed by the Department of Family Services and Islander Affairs in Queensland to meet this need. The authors describe this program and provide the details of a study conducted to compare the social circumstances, over time, of a group of young people who participated in the program. It was found that the young people became progressively better prepared for independence over the period of the study.

Much has been written about the plight of young people who leave government guardianship ill prepared for adult life. This article describes a study conducted to identify the change in social circumstances, over time, of a group of young people who accessed a program designed to take up the challenge of preparing young people in care for independence.

Background

Children are brought into the legal guardianship of welfare departments primarily to secure their protection from further abuse and neglect. By taking this step, these government agencies are clearly stating that they can provide a higher quality of parental care than the child's natural parents. The results of many studies call this into question.

A numbers of studies have been completed, in both the United States and United Kingdom, which examine the impact of guardianship on young people (Crompton, 1978; Hart, 1984; National Association of Young People in Care, 1984; Rutter et al. 1983; Stein, 1986; Stein, 1988). These studies examine the problems and experiences of young people in the process of leaving care, and after care. They describe unstable accommodation, unemployment, loneliness, depression, poverty and limited parenting skills as commonplace.

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Raychaba (1987) identifies the risk factors associated with sixteen year olds who leave care: homelessness; substance abuse; transience of life-style and relationships; emotional and psychiatric disturbances; lack of education, job skills, social skills and support networks; and involvement in prostitution.

Some studies focus on the longer term impact of government care on adult life (Fanshel et al. 1978; Festinger, 1984; Harari, 1981; Rest et al. 1984; Zimmerman, 1982). These studies highlight that most of the adults interviewed were functioning independently and had outwardly satisfactory lives. However, each of these studies also indicated that these adults generally showed the impact of their time in care: some experienced difficulty in forming significant relationships, had a poor self image and an unresolved sense of loss (Rest et al. 1984), generally they did not achieve well educationally and had poorer health status (Zimmerman, 1982).

Moynihan (1988) makes mention of a number of studies, conducted in the United States in the 1980s, that indicate that young people who were in foster care, were disproportionately represented as welfare recipients, in shelters and as prisoners in jail.

These disturbing findings add weight to the call for government agencies to provide structured programs aimed at assisting young people to make the transition to independence. In Australia, the need for this has been

clearly stated by a number of writers (Ainsworth, 1987; Hirst, 1989; Liddell, 1992; National Inquiry into Homeless Children, 1989; Paxman, 1992; Poulos, 1983; Senate Standing Committee on Social Welfare, 1985; Shaver & Paxman, 1992; Taylor, 1990; Selected Sections of the Welfare and Community Services Review, v.1 & 2, 1984). One of these reports, the National Inquiry into Homeless Children, provided the impetus for the development of the Transition from Care Program.

Transition from Care Program

The Transition from Care Program operated state wide, and was developed by the Queensland Department of Family Services and Aboriginal and Islander Affairs, with the aim of assisting young people in care to develop the skills necessary to move toward successful independence, and to ensure that ongoing supportive networks were in place when the young person left care.

The program's target group included young people aged between fifteen and eighteen who were subject to guardianship orders. The program also had the flexibility to accept young people who had been released from care within the previous six months.

All of the young people who participated in the program were, on referral, considered 'high risk'. Their backgrounds included some common

themes: experiences of abuse and/or neglect from family; a long history of involvement with the Department of Family Services; a high degree of mobility; a history of numerous placements, including foster families, family group homes and institutions; a history of witnessing or being subject to family violence; a lack of support networks in the community; and a lack of participation in employment, education or training.

The program was essentially designed to provide an individualised program for each young person, aimed at meeting the young person's specific needs and goals. To maximise a young person's ownership and commitment to the program, it was essential that it was the young person's decision to become involved. Child Care Officers (Departmental case workers) would refer young people to the program. On making a decision to participate, each young person would choose the goals he/she wished to achieve. Progress was reviewed at planning meetings every six to eight weeks. Young people participated in the program, on average, for four to six months.

The program was staffed by a State coordinator, six Regional Coordinators, and a large number of Youth Resource Workers employed on a casual basis to work directly with the young people. Youth Resource Workers worked an average of five hours a week with each young person.

Principles of intervention

The following principles were adopted as guides to intervention with the young people on the program:

- All young people have a right to have their basic needs met.
- All young people have the potential for growth and development when given the appropriate opportunities.
- Adolescence can be characterised by periods of experimentation, testing of values and overall identity searching. This process requires the support of caring adults.
- Achieving independence takes time – it involves an ongoing learning process. All young people require assistance at different stages along this journey.
- No-one is totally independent. Everyone people need ongoing supportive networks.

- Young people are intrinsically linked to their family, social and cultural background. This must be respected and incorporated within any intervention plan.

- The Department, the family and the community have a shared responsibility to assist young people in care to move successfully towards independence.

- Change is most likely to occur when young people are involved in participative processes for program design.

- Young people have a right to privacy and therefore should be involved in decisions about dissemination of their information.

- Quality outcomes for young people can be achieved through the one to one worker/client relationship. Workers should be selected according to appropriate values, skills and culture.

Target areas

The Transition from Care Program identified 10 key areas in the lives of young people, crucial to successful independence from departmental care.

These were:

A. Situational factors

1. Income
2. Accommodation
3. Employment/training/education
4. Helping agency network

B. Social factors

5. Family networks
6. Social networks

C. Personal factors

7. Practical living skills
8. Relationship/social issues
9. Personal issues
10. Parenting issues

The Study

A study was conducted in 1991 and 1992 to assist in assessing the effectiveness of the program and to identify directions for future program development.

Method

The study focused on measuring the young people's progress in the ten target areas. Measures of the young person's status in relation to the target areas were taken at the time of referral (pre-program), the time of exit from the program (ex-program), and 6-12 months after the program (post-program), through completion of questionnaires. Each of the target

areas was broken down into components and compared over the three phases of data collection. Trends across the period of the study are noted later in this article.

The questionnaires were completed by different people at different stages: most commonly the Child Care Officer (with or without the young person) at referral; the Regional Co-ordinator or the Youth Resource Worker in conjunction with the participant at the end of the program; and interviewers were employed to discuss with participants their progress, status and thoughts about the program, at the post-program phase of the evaluation.

In order to achieve increased viability, it was essential that interviewers had a uniform understanding of what each measure meant (eg. when is a young person proficient in budgeting skills?). These 'measures' were agreed upon by a group of program co-ordinators and youth workers.

It is important to note that since each young person in the program had unique needs and goals, all of these indicators are not relevant to all of the young people in the program. The study did not focus on measuring the young person's progress towards the particular goals they had chosen, but rather on measuring the young person's progress across the broad spectrum of the identified social indicators.

In 1991, 122 participants finished in the program's initial six months. In the following year, only fifty-seven of these young people were able to be located, forty-nine of whom agreed to be involved in the post-program evaluation interviews. Six young people chose not to participate; another two were unable to be interviewed because of their severe intellectual disability.

The location of past participants was sought by checking their last known address, or contacting parents or past care providers. The inability to locate 65 of these young people appears to indicate that there was some degree of mobility amongst the participants and thus raises concern about the program's success in assisting young people to achieve stability of accommodation.

On comparing the social indicators at referral for the original 122 participants to those of the forty-nine in the post-program study group, this latter group was found to

Age	Gender		Total
	Males	Females	
No answer	0	2	2
15	2	4	6
16	9	8	17
17	7	13	20
18	1	3	4
Total	19	30	49

be representative of the total group in most respects. The major discrepancy was that, in the original group, 51% were male, whereas in the study group, this reduced to 39%. There were also slightly more Aboriginal/Torres Strait Islander young people in the study group (22%) than in the original group (17%).

In the study group, there were nineteen males and thirty females who completed the three phase study, including eleven Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders. The young people came from a range of places in Queensland. Details of participants' age, cultural background and geographical region are tabulated in Tables 1 to 3.

Region	Gender		Total
	Males	Females	
Brisbane nth	3	5	8
Brisbane sth	4	4	8
S-W Qld	5	10	15
Central Qld	5	9	14
North Qld	2	2	4

1. Income

Intervention strategies

A regular and stable income is essential to enable young people to live successfully in an independent situation. This income can be in the form of various benefits obtained from welfare agencies or through paid employment. Intervention in this area focused on assisting young people to gain the skills necessary to attain and maintain appropriate and stable income.

Young people were assisted to learn the skills of opening bank accounts,

Culture	Gender		Total
	Males	Females	
No answer	2	0	2
Aboriginal/Torres Strait Islander	4	7	11
Aust. born - English speaking b/ground	12	21	33
Aust. born - Non English speaking b/ground	0	1	1
Overseas born - English speaking b/ground	1	1	2
Overseas born - Non English speaking b/ground	0	0	0

obtaining tax file numbers and negotiating with Social Security, other welfare agencies and employers. Youth Resource workers helped young people obtain information, and supported them in these activities, but the young people were encouraged to do most of the 'work' themselves. This increased the possibility of the learning being retained so that the young people would be able to negotiate their own income needs as required in the future.

The study

At referral, 57% of young people were noted to have appropriate income (ie, correct according to Social Security guidelines, and stable/ongoing) This increased to 88% ex-program and further to 90% post-program.

At referral, 10% of young people had no form of income support (no job, no benefit, no family or fostering support). At ex-program and post-program there were no young people in this situation.

At referral, 27% of young people were noted as having the skills to negotiate with Social Security without the assistance of the Department of Family Services staff. This increased to 67% ex-program. Post-program, 86% of young people had accessed Social Security without assistance.

Young people accessed appropriate income and gained the skills to negotiate their income needs independently.

2. Accommodation

Intervention strategies

Work in this area initially involved assisting young people to identify the factors which had led to their current accommodation problems. These factors included: violence in the home; the young person's limited

or lack of social and practical living skills; unstable income and poor budgeting skills; unsafe and unaffordable accommodation; unresolved personal/emotional problems.

Once the key factors were identified, the young person and youth worker developed strategies to address them.

Some young people were assisted to improve the stability of their current accommodation, others to return to their immediate or extended family. Many were assisted to find independent accommodation.

Wherever possible, the young person's family was engaged to provide assistance and support for the current or new placement. By doing this, it was hoped that the family relationships would be strengthened and the family more prepared to provide an ongoing support role.

Young people who had significant accommodation needs that could not be met by their family, were encouraged to access supportive accommodation services. However, for some young people, this was not possible. The negative behaviour they exhibited during previous contact with these agencies, had led the agencies to refuse them re-entry. Others chose not to take up a supported accommodation option. Thus for this group of young people, independent rental was the only option available.

Young people were actively involved in all activities. This was to maximise their potential to repeat the process again later.

The study

On referral, only 49% of young people were stated to be in either stable or very stable accommodation. The placement/accommodation of the remaining young people was considered to be unsafe, likely to break down or unaffordable. By the end of

the program, the number in stable or very stable accommodation had increased to 73%. This increased further to 84% post-program.

The viability (ie, the length of time the young person could stay) of accommodation was also measured. At referral, 24% of young people had accommodation that was considered 'not viable at all'. Only 24% had accommodation in which they could stay indefinitely. At ex-program, 49% had accommodation in which they could stay indefinitely, only 4% had accommodation considered 'not viable at all'. Post-program, the number of young people who could stay indefinitely in their present accommodation had increased further to 61%. At this point, 6% had accommodation that was 'not viable at all'.

The study results showed some interesting changes in the type of accommodation accessed by young people.

At referral, 18% of young people lived with their natural family. This increased to 27% during the program, reducing to 14% by the end of the program. In the period between the end of program and post-program, 39% of young people had obtained a period of accommodation with their families. At post-program, 31% lived with their families.

At referral, 16% of young people were in independent rentals, which increased to 37% ex-program. Slightly more, 41%, had been in independent rentals during the program. At post-program, 33% were in independent rentals, though 57% are noted to have accessed independent rental at some stage in the period subsequent to the program.

The numbers of young people in foster care was 16% at referral and was still 16% post-program. The number of young people in group home/residential accommodation reduced from 22% at referral, to 2% post-program.

A number of young people accessed youth shelters and supported accommodation (26%) during the study period. Post-program, 10% of young people were in this type of accommodation. At referral, three young people were on the streets, there were one post-program.

Results indicate that during the program, participating young people obtained more stable and

viable accommodation, tending to move back to living with their family or into independent rentals. These trends were maintained post program.

3. Employment, education, training

Intervention strategies

This area focused largely on increasing the young people's potential to gain employment - either currently or in the future. The key to this was assisting young people to access training/education.

Young people were assisted and supported in their decisions to remain at or return to school. Some young people were linked into training courses, others to work experience.

Many young people were assisted to learn the skills required to attain employment: knowing where to find jobs; how to contact employers; writing a resume; completing job applications; canvassing for jobs; interview skills; maintaining motivation while job searching; and maintaining employment. Whenever possible, young people were linked to community agencies that assisted young people to access employment.

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Young people who had been unemployed for a long period of time had usually lost hope that they would ever be employed. Some lacked the commitment or discipline to work towards becoming more employable. Work with these young people needed to take a long term view - contact focused on linking them with activ-

ities that revived their interest in life and provided them with a sense of achievement.

However, given the current economic climate where there are high youth unemployment rates, it is very important to assist young people to see personal worth beyond the confines of whether or not a person is employed. Effort was made to assist young people to explore other areas of success that were meaningful to them. Support was engaged from family networks to highlight the young person's other successes.

The study

On entering the program, majority of young people (55%) were unemployed. There was little change in these figures at the key evaluation points: at the end of the program 49% were unemployed and at post-program 53%.

The number of young people employed full-time had increased slightly from 4% pre-program to 8% post-program. The number employed part-time or casual increased from 2% pre-program to 10% post-program.

It is interesting to note though, that larger numbers of young people had been employed both during the program and in the period prior to the post-evaluation: 14% were employed full-time at some stage during the program; 20% were employed full-time at some point after leaving the program, but prior to the post-evaluation. During the program, 14% were employed part-time or casually, which increased to 27% for the period between ex-program and post-program interviews.

Thus while some young people were able to access employment at stages during the study period, few were able to maintain this. It is difficult to ascertain whether this was due mostly to the economic conditions where, according to the Australian Bureau of Statistics (1992), 27% of young people aged 15-19 seeking full time employment were unemployed, or to deficiencies in the young people's ability to maintain employment.

Prior to the program, 2% of young people were involved in some form of skill development training. This increased to 37% during the program, decreasing to 16% in the period between ex-program and post-program.

At referral, 31% of young people attended school. This reduced to 20% at ex-program.

At post-program, there were still 20% attending school.

Results indicate that during the program many young people become involved in skills based training to assist them towards obtaining employment. A number of young people obtained employment, but few were able to maintain this.

4. Helping agency network

Intervention strategies

Assistance to meet a young person's needs should ideally be accessed from his/her existing natural networks. Obtaining support from outside these networks was only encouraged where natural networks were unable, despite assistance, to meet these needs.

Most communities have a wide range of helping agencies that can assist young people with their needs, especially in times of crisis.

Intervention in this area focused on preparing young people for independence by providing them with knowledge of, and exposure to, the variety of helping agencies present in their community.

Simply referring a young person to an agency for assistance was rarely enough. Young people in crisis, especially when unfamiliar with the referral agency, needed assistance to develop the skills and confidence to access the agencies effectively.

Youth workers ensured that young people gained the required knowledge and obtained the necessary skills to access a range of agencies in the future by actively involving them in all agency contacts.

The study

During the program, young people had contact with a wide range of agencies including Social Security (28%), CES (34%), DEVETIR (18%), Skillshare (17%), accommodation services (19%). Table 4 shows that for all agencies except DEVETIR, the number of young people who accessed these agencies independently increased at ex-program and again at post-program.

During the Transition from Care Program, young people accessed a number of welfare agencies and increased in their ability to access these services independently over the period of evaluation.

5. Family networks

Intervention strategies

Young people are inextricably linked to their families. Young people who have been in care a long time may carry the belief that the Department has prevented or restricted contact with their family unnecessarily. This view may also be shared by their family; they may blame the Department entirely for this, without taking responsibility for their own part in the process.

Many young people in care develop an idealised view of their family or of how 'families' should be. The young person may dream of returning to an ideal family or judge their family according to unrealistic standards.

For some young people, contact with their family has not been given a priority and so they have not been able to maintain family relationships.

The pain associated with these un-addressed family issues can become a barrier in young people's lives which hampers their development in other areas. It is therefore a priority to assist young people to address family issues.

Key to intervention in this area was assisting young people to understand and accept the reality of their family situation. In most instances, this required

working through Department files with them, assisting them to locate family members and to make decisions about and negotiate ongoing contact.

For all young people, this involved pain as they confronted the past in order to move into a future less bound by their painful history. For some this meant adjusting to decisions made by family members not to have contact with them. Many others were more able to accept the reality of their family situation. Some made decisions not to have contact with some family members because it was unsafe or emotionally too destructive at this stage; others were able to negotiate a level of relationship with key family members that was comfortable for them. Many experienced a healing of previously estranged relationships.

Families were encouraged to actively participate in the planning and carrying out of activities, wherever possible, to strengthen relationships and encourage the family's ongoing support of the young person.

The study

Prior to the program, only 24% of participants were noted to have regular contact with family. This increased to 27% at the time of ex-program phase, and 55% at the time of post-program interview.

The number of young people who either never or very occasionally had contact with their family decreased from 41% at the referral stage to 36% at ex-program, and only 28% at post-program.

It must be taken into account when analysing these figures that it is not always possible or appropriate for young people to see their family on a regular basis. It may be unsafe for some, while for others the rejection they experience with their family may be too painful. The fact that 35% of the young people chose to work on the goal of accepting the reality of their family situation, indicates that these factors may have been significant for the young people involved in the evaluation.

Results indicate that through the period of evaluation a significant number of young people experienced a strengthening of family relationships.

Table 4
% of young people who accessed the agency independently

Agency	Pre-program	Ex-program	Post-program
Social Security	14	33	86
CES	16	37	76
DEVETIR	2	10	8
Skillshare	2	12	20
Accommodation services	8	18	29

6. Social Networks

Intervention strategies

A key to successful independence is the presence of a supportive and ongoing natural network.

The young people came from a range of social and family backgrounds. It was essential for these to be strengthened to ensure that the young people had an effective support system in place for when they left care.

Engaging significant people in the young person's network in the planning and implementation of the young person's intervention plan, assisted the maintenance and development of these existing networks.

The youth resource workers' role was to maintain and develop a young person's network, not to replace it. Therefore workers did not perform any task that could be performed adequately by the young person's existing network.

Plans to develop a young person's social network aimed to:

- (1) target destructive and conflictual relationships to effect more positive outcomes;
- (2) develop and support existing relationships;
- (3) assist the development of new supportive relationships.

To achieve these aims, workers were required to work alongside the young person's family, friends and other people of significance, as well as to link the young person into community resources (especially recreational) and networks.

A successful outcome of intervention was for the young person's existing network to take over the ongoing support role previously undertaken by the worker. All intervention needed to keep this outcome in mind; preparing support networks to be able to perform this task, and ensuring that the worker was not involved in a young person's life when natural networks could fill the same role.

The study

The number of young people who had supportive peer networks at the beginning of the program was 39%. This increased to 82% at ex-program and decreased slightly to 76% post-program.

Only 29% of young people had supportive adult networks (not including

welfare workers or family members) prior to beginning the program. This increased to 65% ex-program and increased even further to 76% post-program.

Young people had increased supportive social networks over the period of the study.

7. Practical living skills

Intervention strategies

Young people require a range of practical living skills to live independently. Youth workers worked alongside the young people to provide opportunity for them to learn and practice a range of practical living skills. Some young people learnt these skills in a group format. The support and input of family and social support networks was actively canvassed to assist in this area.

The study

Significant changes were noted in the area of practical living skills. The number of young people proficient in each of the skills measured, increased by the conclusion of their programs. At post-program evaluation, even more young people had gained proficiency in the measured skills.

Table 5
Practical living skills - % presently proficient in

Proficient in	Pre-program	Ex-program	Post-program
Budgeting	14	51	55
Cooking/nutrition	29	69	86
Cleaning/hygiene	45	71	88
Obtaining/maintaining accommodation	6	41	59
Use of telephone	67	86	96
Use of public transport	14	49	65

Results indicate that young people gained independent living skills while on the Transition from Care Program. The young people's level of skill continued to increase post-program.

8. Relationship/Social Skills

Intervention strategies

Relationships are a keen interest for young people. However, few feel confident in their ability to form, develop and maintain relationships.

This area of work involved a range of practical exercises that increased young people's insight into their own behaviour and presentation, and helped them to both take responsibility for their own behaviour and to explore and practice new ways of relating.

Table 6
Relationship & social skills - % presently proficient in

Proficient in	Pre-program	Ex-program	Post-program
Identifying & verbalising own goals	45	69	82
Ability to take responsibility for own behaviour	27	41	78
Communication skills	37	61	86
Identifying rights as a young person	18	45	-
Ability to identify people as trustworthy	18	39	45
Ability to negotiate conflict constructively	4	22	45
Ability to protect self from harm	16	22	61
Personal presentation	45	73	92

The study

As with practical living skills, significant changes were noted in the area of relationship and social skills by the conclusion of the programs. At post-program evaluation, increased numbers of young people were noted to have gained proficiency in the measured skill.

Young people increased their relationship skills while on the program. This trend continued post-program.

9. Personal Issues

Intervention strategies

Unresolved issues will consistently affect decisions and subsequent behaviour.

Young people in care, in addition to the usual personal issues faced by other people in the teenage years, also carry the baggage that comes with a history which includes family abuse or neglect, alternative care placements and many changes in Departmental workers and care providers.

Young people require assistance both to identify and to address these personal issues, in order to reduce their impact in the future and to develop effective coping mechanisms.

The cornerstone of this work was the young person's trust in the worker. Effective work in this area required workers to have counselling skills.

This work frequently involved going through Departmental files with the young people, to assist them to come to terms with their history. Young people tended to be confused about their past and blamed themselves for the abuse and changes they had experienced. Many young people had become involved in self-destructive behaviours in an attempt to cope with their pain. Through the process of exploring their history, workers were able to address these issues and assist them to develop more constructive ways of coping.

At times, it was more appropriate to link young people to a specialised counsellor or support group. Workers provided an important role in helping young people to identify a suitable counsellor or group and in preparing young people to be ready to access them.

The study

This area focused on three main measures:

- (1) participants ability to make decisions that were not impaired by their past experiences;
- (2) their understanding of their time in care;
- (3) their involvement in self destructive behaviours.

Pre-program, 37% of young people were noted to have their decision-making capacity significantly impaired by their past experiences. This decreased to 33% ex-program and later to 14% post-program. The proportion of young people whose decision-making capability was not impaired at all by past experiences was only 4% at referral. This increased significantly to 35% post-program.

At referral, 31% of young people are noted to have 'some' degree of knowledge about their time in care. A further 22% are noted to have 'significant' knowledge. This increased to 37% with 'some degree of knowledge and 43% with 'significant' knowledge. The numbers decreased post-program by which point, 20% had 'some' knowledge and 41% had 'significant' knowledge.

At referral, 31% of young people were said to have displayed self-destructive behaviour (including drug and alcohol abuse and suicide attempts). This decreased to 14% during the program but increased significantly post-program to 43%.

Young people became more able to make decisions that were not impaired by their past experiences. There was an increase in young people's knowledge of their time in care while on the program, but for some this knowledge was not sustained post-program. Results indicate that self-destructive behaviour increased significantly post-program.

10. Parenting Issues

Intervention strategies

Many young people had an interest in parenting. For some, it was a desire to be better prepared at some future point when they have children. For others, currently parents or pregnant, this was a very pressing issue. Some of these young people were considering whether to parent at all.

Some young people are able to successfully parent children. Key features of this success are the young person's development of the necessary parenting skills and the presence of a supportive and ongoing network to assist them in their role as parents.

Intervention in this area focused on assisting young people to be better prepared for a parenting role. This involved the development of both the required skills and a supportive network. Family and community resources were accessed extensively.

The study

Nine young people were noted to be either parents or pregnant at referral. At post-program, eight were parenting their child full-time.

At referral, only two of these young people were noted as proficient in their knowledge of pregnancy and childbirth. One was identified as proficient in the ability to meet her own health needs while pregnant, and in her ability to meet her child's needs when born.

Only six young people chose parenting issues as a focus of their program. At ex-program, five of these were proficient in each of the measured areas.

At post-program, all young people were assessed on their proficiencies in this area. Fifty-five per cent were noted to be proficient in knowledge of pregnancy and child birth; 37% were seen as proficient in their ability to meet their own health needs while pregnant; 43% were marked as proficient in their ability to meet their child's needs when born.

Some young people increased in their 'parenting' knowledge and skill while on the program.

Discussion

Study results indicate significant changes in the lives of numbers of the young people who accessed the Transition from Care Program. These included:

- accessing appropriate income and gaining skills to negotiate their income needs independently;
- attaining more stable and viable accommodation, tending to move back to living with their family or into independent rental;
- becoming involved in skills-based training;

- accessing a number of helping agencies and increasing their ability to access these services independently;
- gaining independent living and relationship skills;
- experiencing a strengthening of family relationships and gaining peer and adult support networks;
- decision making becoming less impaired by past experiences;
- gaining greater knowledge of their time in care.
- for most participants who nominated to work on parenting issues, gaining parenting skills and knowledge.

In most of the target areas, positive changes encountered at ex-program had increased by the time post-program measures were obtained.

High unemployment rates within the general community may help to account for the low numbers of young people who were able to obtain and maintain employment.

The significant increase in young people noted to be displaying self-destructive behaviours post-program is difficult to understand in the light of the many other positive results. The evaluation did not provide detail about the nature of the self-destructive behaviour, thus it is difficult to ascertain the seriousness of these results or to compare them with the suicide and drug and alcohol abuse rates of Australian youth generally.

The inability to locate sixty-five of the past participants indicates that there was some degree of mobility. Even though the study group was found to be representative of the total group in most respects at referral, the large numbers of unlocated young people makes it difficult to ascertain just how representative the post-program results are of the entire group.

Without a control group of similar young people who had not accessed the Transition from Care Program, it is difficult to ascertain the impact of the young people's increasing age/maturity on the results. However, even taking the impact of maturation into account, it would appear that the Transition from Care Program played a significant role in assisting some young people to be better prepared for independence.

Conclusion

The aim of the Transition from Care Program was to assist young people to gain the skills to live independently of the Department of Family Services and Aboriginal and Islander Affairs, and to ensure that supportive networks were in place when young people left care. This article provides data that indicates that the study group of young people who accessed the program became better prepared for independence over the period of the study. Clearly, the Transition from Care Program intervention assisted this progress.

It took courage for young people to make a decision to become involved in the Transition from Care Program. The results of this study are evidence of their desire to take responsibility for their own independence, to break out of old patterns and begin to build a new future for themselves.

Welfare Departments play a key role in assisting young people in their care to be able to take up the challenge of independence. The Transition from Care Program presents a model that has shown to be effective in assisting to meet this need for a range of young people in a variety of locations. ♦

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