Education and children in out-of-home care

A positive and successful educational experience for children in care is a key factor which contributes to their future life outcomes as an adult. The engagement of children in education is recognised as a critical issue that warrants the same level of attention as other aspects of their well-being. The research on children in out-of-home care and education shows that education should be a priority for child protection and education professionals.

Current educational outcomes for children in out-of-home care

- Children in out-of-home care are an at risk group for less desirable educational outcomes compared to the non-care population.
- Children in out-of-home care may not reach their academic potential, be over-represented in special education and perform below their grade level. They are also less likely to progress to tertiary or other post secondary education.
- Some children in out-of-home care have behavioural difficulties which can heighten their risk for outcomes such as drop-out, truancy, repeating grades, suspensions and exclusions.

The risks and reasons for educational challenges

- A child’s circumstances prior to coming into care can impact on their academic and social capacity, for example, lack of educational encouragement and preparation by parents, poverty and economic disadvantage.
- The impact of abuse and harm can affect all domains of a child’s development (motor, social, psychological, physical and cognitive). Harm can also impact on a child’s learning and academic performance and social relationships.
- Out-of-home care factors such as multiple placements, school changes and court appearances can cause considerable disruption and discontinuity to a child’s education and connectedness to the school environment.
- When professionals organise placements, school stability and the educational needs of children in out-of-home care are not always prioritised.
- When children in out-of-home care do change school, lack of coordination between Child Safety and education professionals and/or delays in the transfer of information by professionals (about a child’s educational status and needs), may occur. Also, insufficient monitoring and record keeping of educational progress and schools attended may occur, and some schools may not be informed that a child is in out-of-home care.
- School absences, for any reason, can lead to a heightened risk of children disengaging with, or not feeling a sense of belonging to, a school. The child’s perceived level of engagement at school and peer relationships can influence their willingness and motivation to attend.
- Some carers, social workers and teachers do not expect children in out-of-home care to do well educationally due to the children’s history of being in out-of-home care. Low-level expectations, or a lack of appreciation of the importance of education, may be directly or indirectly communicated to the child, sometimes impacting on educational attainment.
Some children in out-of-home care may not have a constant supporter of their educational needs who is well-informed of their capabilities and limits or is actively considering and discussing their education and career aspirations with them.

Young people who are not able to successfully complete secondary education are at risk of unemployment, inability to progress a career or higher education, poverty, being a recipient of government assistance, poor self esteem, less likelihood of participation in recreational interests, emotional and psychological difficulties, homelessness, criminality, isolation, relationship problems and health issues.

Young people transitioning from school to work or post-secondary education may not have the emotional, housing and financial support that young people in the non-out-of-home care population may have to progress educational goals.

The importance of education for children in out-of-home care

- Positive educational experiences and attainment for children is vital for enhancing the likelihood of positive adult outcomes. Young people who successfully complete school are more likely to enjoy adult outcomes such as employment, financial independence, positive self-esteem and positive relationships.
- School provides much more than academic instruction. The opportunity for children to participate in a range of social experiences provides essential developmental scaffolding for them in terms of their social, emotional and academic learning. School can also provide a regular, consistent and safe environment for children.
- Children have the opportunity to develop positive relationships with school staff. Teachers can be particularly influential for children in facilitating their engagement in the school environment.
- Children’s educational engagement should be a major practice goal for case workers, teachers and carers.

What can case workers do to assist children with their education?

- Be positive about education and try to model and facilitate pro-education attitudes.
- Promote early education by encouraging a child’s attendance at Kindergarten Programs and planning for a smooth transition from kindergarten to preparatory year.
- Participate in the development and review of education support plans and make them meaningful to the child or young person to facilitate their participation and involvement.
- Recognise the importance of school choice and school stability, minimise disruptions and advocate and arrange for appropriate assistance (case workers or specialised support).
- If school change occurs, ensure that relevant information is exchanged, the child’s records, progress and needs are promptly communicated and a joint review of the education support plan is undertaken with the school.
- Enquire about the child’s schooling, their progress, peer relationships, their perception of school, their level of connectedness with school staff and any issues that may be impacting upon their level of participation or achievement.
- Liaise with the carer and school and meet promptly over any issues or potential difficulties - tackle educational issues early on, rather than later.
• Become informed about what is available for the child both within and outside of school.
• Discuss education as a pathway to great things- cultivate motivation and explore aspirations and dreams.
• Be an advocate for the child.
• Explore the child's interests and facilitate opportunities for participation in these interests.
• Celebrate progress and achievements.
• Encourage carers to:
  • help make learning fun.
  • find ways of learning that make sense or are relevant to the child.
  • have a variety of interesting books and other learning media available, and participate with the child in using them. Read to and with the child.
  • participate in and contribute to school events.
  • have a nice, quiet designated study space for the child.

For further details, refer to the practice paper: Valuing and improving educational outcomes for children in out-of-home care.