



A Guide for Schools Working with Students in Statutory Out of Home Care

This guide aims to describe how separation from birth families and being placed in statutory out of home care (OOHC) can affect the schooling of children and young people. It suggests ways in which schools can play a key role in improving the education of this group of vulnerable children and young people. It is based on research findings, discussions with schools and feedback from young people in care.

What is OOHC?

The term 'out of home care' refers to children and young people who are placed in statutory out of home care because they are in need of care and protection that is necessary for their safety, welfare and wellbeing. The Children's Court ultimately decides if parental responsibility is placed with Community Services.

Children and young people in statutory OOHC are cared for in family settings with relative, kinship or authorised carers. Others may live in residential settings, which are usually staffed by rotating youth workers.

Why are children and young people in OOHC?

For a variety of reasons including neglect, abuse (physical/emotional/sexual) or as a result of irretrievable breakdown in the relationship between the young people and their families.

The trauma associated with experiences of neglect, violence and relationship disruption is poisonous to the lives of children and young people. It undermines their self-confidence and eats away at their self-esteem. It can make them feel worthless and unlovable. It reinforces their vulnerability.

Making Space for Learning Australian Childhood Foundation 2010

What does it feel like to be in care?

Although children may feel safer, they have to cope with significant loss of family and friends.

They have to adjust to many changes including new carers and new schools.

Few feel involved in the major decisions that are made about their lives.

Many feel uncertain about their future.



Most children and young people do not want to be in care.

Research findings

Children and young people in OOHC care are as capable of learning as any other children. Some may already be achieving academic, sporting or social success. However, for the majority of students in OOHC, Australian and international research indicates that they:

Achieve lower learning outcomes, particularly in numeracy and literacy.

Suffer from educational deficit.

Have specific issues relating to development at key stages of schooling.

Exhibit a range of problematic behaviours.

Great Expectations – Child Safety Commissioner 2007

There is a need for schools and the agencies caring for these children and young people to continue to **work closely together** to improve their educational outcomes. This collaborative and interagency approach is reinforced by the NSW Government Initiative ‘*Keep Them Safe- A shared approach to child wellbeing 2009 -2014*’.

Why is education important for children and young people in OOHC?

For young people separated from their families, school may be the most constant factor in their lives and a place where, potentially, they can be like everyone else.

School can help make a positive difference in their lives. It is an opportunity to develop skills, talents and self-confidence, receive praise and encouragement, make friends and achieve success.

Young people who successfully complete school are more likely to enjoy a range of positive adult outcomes such as fulfilling employment, financial independence, positive self-esteem, a sense of personal competency and independence, and other social and relational benefits that stem from success.

Mondy (2009), Altshuler (2003), Hook & Courtney (2011), (as cited in Valuing and improving educational outcomes for children in out of home care Practice Paper February 2013 p7)



Suggested ways in which schools can help children and young people in OOHC

Sometimes it is helpful to nominate a staff member as a mentor. *Most young people surveyed revealed a very strong need to have a special person at the school for when they are in need of support.*

Students' interests and talents should be identified and encouraged, and students linked to appropriate school programs where possible.

The importance of raising teacher awareness around understanding of what it is like for children and young people living in OOHC was identified.

An effective communication system between the school and the carer and relevant agency is important. These key people should be advised of any concerns so that the issues can be addressed promptly. It is important that all key stakeholders are invited to attend Learning Support Team meetings.

Confidentiality about sensitive issues is extremely important for young people in care and a breach of confidentiality can negatively impact on their attitude to school.

Linking the student with an appropriate "buddy" sometimes helps minimise initial fears and reluctance to attend.

Teachers are frequently called upon to deal with sensitive topics. Some topics may cause embarrassment to students in OOHC including discussions about family experiences and family trees, protective behaviours and personal development.

*Some information in this guide was sourced from Uniting Care Burnside – **Identifying Variables in school practice that encourage secondary school attendance in reluctant learners living in substitute care (1997)***