



Adolescence, the transition from childhood to adulthood, can be a challenging time even for our most confident, able and secure young people. For the more vulnerable, a troubled adolescence can all too easily become an even more difficult adulthood with profound and enduring problems. It is perhaps not surprising then that young people are highly susceptible to mental health problems. These disorders have a serious impact on quality of life, and the ability to achieve and function in society. This CLAHRC research project focuses on two groups of potentially vulnerable 16 and 17 year olds, negotiating not only the inevitable developmental transition, but also facing major changes in their care arrangements. These young people in local authority care (YPiC), face the move to independent living, and the young people who are NHS Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service Users (CAMHSu) face either discharge or transfer to an adult service. In both these relatively under-researched groups, evidence suggests that these transitions are problematic. Young people in care often have complex needs and poor outcomes on most indicators (psychological, educational, physical, developmental) and they are over-represented in the group classified as NEET (not in Employment, Education or Training).

Policy context

Young people in care face the crucial transition from local authority (LA) care to independent living at 16yrs to 18yrs, although those in stable foster placements who are remaining in education, may remain under LA care until the age of 24. CAMHS offer psychological and psychiatric treatment to young people with moderate to severe mental health difficulties up to age 18, at which point clients either face discharge, transfer to GP care or transition to Adult Mental Health Services (AMHS) or another appropriate service. The National Service Framework for Children, Young People and Maternity Services recommends that CAMHS sees all children up to their 18th birthday.¹ However there are regional variations to this policy, and Cambridgeshire and Peterborough NHS Trust (CPFT) starts the transition process on or nearing a patient's 17th birthday.² NICE guidelines state that 'the precise timing of arrangements may vary locally, but should usually be completed by the time the young person reaches 18 years old'.³

The research

Eligible participants were aged 16-17 years and approaching transition. YPiC were recruited via Cambridgeshire County Council and Peterborough City Council. The CAMHSu group was recruited via Cambridge and Peterborough Foundation Trust (CPFT) via clinics in Cambridge, Huntingdon and Peterborough. Participants were interviewed by trained researchers at two time points approximately 12 months apart. Interviews established lifetime and current psychiatric diagnoses and service use. Computerised self-report questionnaires assessed current psychological distress, barriers to service use and personality. Standard IQ subtests estimated performance and verbal IQ.

Conclusions

Our findings suggest that the transitions in care arrangements faced by both groups of young people may be compromised by persisting poor mental health. There was a high prevalence of psychotic like symptoms in both groups which was an unexpected finding and requires further evaluation. Particularly in the YPiC group, poor mental health was often accompanied by other potent negative factors, for example non-engagement with services or being unemployed, and this combination is likely to render these youngsters vulnerable as they negotiate the inevitable challenges of independent living.

Impact

As a result of this work, there is a commitment by the local authority to elevate the importance of the mental health of young people in care. CLAHRC CP researchers are now devising and piloting a new mental health training course for foster carers in collaboration with Cambridgeshire County Council and independent fostering agencies in the region.

Research partners

Our partners in this study were CPFT, Cambridgeshire County Council Children's Services, Peterborough City Council Children's Services, NHS Cambridgeshire and NHS Peterborough.

References

1. Department of Health (2004). National Service Framework for Children, Young People and Maternity Services: Core Standards.
2. CPFT (2006). Transition Protocol: Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services to Adult Mental Health Services.
3. National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence (2010). Implementation Advice for NICE clinical guidelines for transition from Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services to Adult Mental Health Services.