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The influence of informal relationships on the lives of young people leaving out of home care

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Introduction

- **Study' background, key definitions**

- **How the research was carried out**

- **Practical case demonstration: How the interaction of social capital and social support creates a positive relationship**

- **Specialist worker view: barriers and facilitators**

- **Practical tips: What workers do to help the identification or creation of informal relationships**

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Background to the study

The social issue
- **Compressed and accelerated transitions – negative outcomes**
- **Resilience**

Conceptual and policy context
- **Social Resources – support and social capital**
- **Meet needs to achieve a more gradual transition**
- **Policy is informed by concepts of social capital & social support**

The Empirical Research
- **Informal support is important and there is varied experience of social relationships**

(Feeney and Collins 2014; Hiles, Moss, Wright & Dallos 2013; Mendes, Johnson & Moslehuddin 2011; Stein 2012; Ungar 2012)

Key definitions

Social capital refers to resources a person gains through other people in their network.

Social support is actual or perceived assistance provided by others.

Nominated support person

The interaction of social capital and social support

Young person

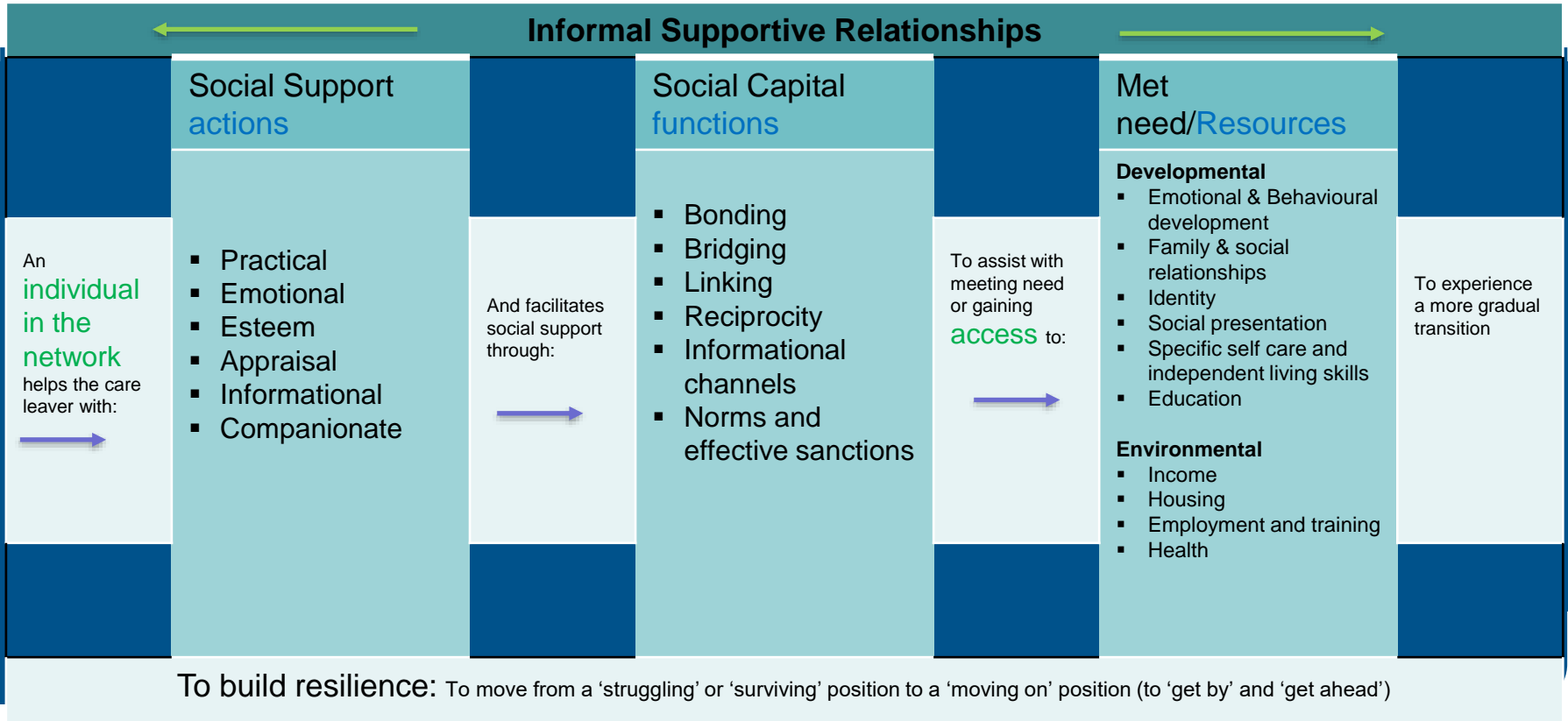MONASH University

How the research was carried out

Methodology

- **Exploratory and qualitative**

Who participated

- **Eight young people and six (matching) nominated support people interviewed**

- **Six specialist workers interviewed, and six specialist workers participated in a focus group (these people were not matched to the young person – seeking a wider view)**

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The concepts used as an analytical framework

Informal Supportive Relationships

Social Support actions

An **individual in the network** helps the care leaver with:

- Practical
- Emotional
- Esteem
- Appraisal
- Informational
- Companionate

And facilitates social support through:

Social Capital functions

- Bonding
- Bridging
- Linking
- Reciprocity
- Informational channels
- Norms and effective sanctions

To assist with meeting need or gaining **access** to:

Met need/Resources

Developmental
- Emotional & Behavioural development
- Family & social relationships
- Identity
- Social presentation
- Specific self care and independent living skills
- Education

Environmental
- Income
- Housing
- Employment and training
- Health

To experience a more gradual transition

To build resilience: To move from a 'struggling' or 'surviving' position to a 'moving on' position (to 'get by' and 'get ahead')

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John (and Amy)

- **Aged 20, living in supported accommodation, unemployed and was planning to study**
- **In care since toddler age**
- **Mixed care experience**
- **Has known Amy since 6 years, monthly visits as respite, kept up while other circumstances changed – some challenging**
- **Social media, texting, seeing each other**
- **Both see each other as 'family'**

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Meaningful relationships

Data	Social Resources	Meeting need
"Oh, my children love him [John]. I mean he was around before my children. So, he gave them bottles and saw them grow up, and so they don't know life without John really. ... I think he feels quite connected with my kids. He often rough and tumbles them and tickles them and throws them around. It's quite terrifying, but it's quite normal. It's what an uncle would do."(Amy)	• **Bonding capital:** People who know each other well and have strong connections. • **Bridging capital:** Horizontal connection to different people and different sources of information and knowledge. • **Reciprocity capital:** social dynamic in which individuals give, receive and return.	**Social relationships –** • Social network of meaningful, stable, appropriate and affectionate relationships with family, peers and other important people. **Positive personal identity –** • Possession or construction of self-worth
"It's usually dinner at theirs [Amy and Matthew], home-cooked meal and that, which is nice."(John)	• **Companionate support:** Spending time with the young person and doing activities together. • **Esteem support:** Showing genuine interest in the young person's wellbeing, providing reassurance of worth and enhancing self-esteem.	
"...but they've (Amy and Matthew) kind of linked me in with other people. Like going to church and that, I know all the people from there. Haven't massively stayed in contact but like I know those people and I can get in touch with them, go to them if I need help or anything."(John)		

Normative social experiences

Data	Social Resources	Meeting need
"And if he [John] needed something we talked about how we could find that and sometimes I would write out step by step what he would do to achieve something. Like he needed his birth extract [abridged birth certificate] once ... so I'd just write down okay you need to go to this address, and do this, and say this, and kind of guide him through it, like I could from afar, in a sense."(Amy)	• **Linking** refers to networks and bonds between people who have different access to resources and power. • Social relations can be used as **information channels** as they are an efficient way in which information is acquired. • **Informational support:** Providing good advice and information about how to handle commonplace situations or do specific tasks. Offer opportunities to learn social skills, or where information can be gleaned through positive role-modelling.	**Specific self-care and independent living skills** - • Knowledge and skills in looking for accommodation and work; managing a domestic situation, health, education and training, and finances; organising oneself for work, and other skills such as getting an identity document.

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Resilience and self-identity

Data	Social Resources	Meeting need
"Life's okay. I mean, I've had a bumpy road. It's had its ups and its downs. Amy has been there through all of it, pretty much". (John)	• **Bonding capital** **Emotional support:** Being present, caring, listening and showing empathy. The young person feels heard or understood and has a person to talk to as they need. • **Esteem support**	**Social relationships –** • Social network of meaningful, stable, appropriate and affectionate relationships with family, peers and other important people. **Positive personal identity –** • Possession or construction of self-worth
"I know that they're (Amy) basically like family to me. I wouldn't say like a second mum or a mum or anything like that. They're not trying to be, but they are family". (John)		

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Progressive responsibility

Data	Social Resources	Meeting need
"John is quite avoidant of conflict... He's a real pacifist and will often just kind of go, 'Well, that doesn't matter. I'll just do this instead.' But we have had discussions about when that's healthy to do and when that's not healthy to do. So, I guess that's more passive conflict of going, 'Well, you could just roll over and pretend like that doesn't matter; however, don't you think it matters because of this and this? And why don't we try this approach instead?' So, I've had conversations like that". (Amy)	• **Bonding capital** • **Social norms about expected behaviour:** Belief about the acceptability of behaviour • **Effective sanctioning of such behaviour:** Correcting and/or approving another person's behaviour to uphold the expected behaviour and standards. • **Informational support** • **Appraisal support:** Providing positive and constructive feedback on achievements or behaviour in any given situation.	**Emotional and behavioural development -** • Internal resources of the young person that manifest in responses to other people and the world around them, as reflected in their feelings and demonstrated through their actions. **Social presentation -** • Capacity to care for appearance, social behaviour and personal habits to influence how other people perceive and treat the young person. The young person develops knowledge on how to be responsible for their actions.

Worker Perspectives

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Variability of informal relationships

- **Insufficient, positive, informal relationships**

- **Harmful relationships**

- **Beneficial relationships**

Impact of insufficient, positive, informal relationships

- **Extreme loneliness**
- **Lack of participation in typical social, including relational experiences**
- **Affects ability to establish and maintain other informal relationships.**
- **May miss out on the opportunity to be loved.**
- **May miss out on the opportunity to develop social skills.**
- **If missing school, it may preclude care-experienced young people from the benefit of learning how to interact with school peers.**

Impact of harmful informal relationships

- **When associating with people needing help can have the impact of causing more trouble for the young person.**

- **Harmful impact if associating with drug dealers.**

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Impact of beneficial informal relationships

- **The opportunity to give back.**

- **Being bridged to other people's families who have been helpful with accommodation, education and employment.**

- **Young person who remains at school can perhaps feel that they are achieving and feel that they are a part of a wider community.**

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Barriers

- **Trauma – negatively influences a young person's behaviour and socialisation, affecting their ability to create and maintain enduring relationships**
- **Stigma – shame and embarrassment**
- **Unpredictability**
- **Institutionalised care**
- **Structural barriers**
- **Deficiency in guaranteed housing**
- **Lack of funding for social activities**

Facilitators

- **Intelligence, talent and those who can process their trauma. Relationships that somewhat compensate for trauma**
- **De-stigmatisation – workers relational work – how they use the social resources of social capital and support**
- **Predictability**
- **Normative experiences**
- **Continuing care**

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Tips: What workers do to help the identification or creation of informal relationships

- **Try to ensure that their young clients associate with people who will be a healthy influence.**
- **Influence relationships by helping young people to participate in their interests.**
- **Advocacy**
- **Eco mapping**

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Conclusions

Informal social relationships can

1. Be valuable for all care-experienced young people
2. Be more continuous than formal social capital
3. Help build informal, meaningful and trustworthy relationships over time, through the functions of bonding and reciprocity, helping other functions of social capital to take effect
4. Create normative social experiences for young people in and leaving care
5. Help develop resilience and positive self-identity
6. Help develop progressive responsibility gradually

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Clarion call

'Put simply, for many young people, changing the odds must go hand in hand with overcoming the odds' (Mike Stein 2012: 166)

Therefore, increasing positive informal relationships needs to have elevated and equal importance with other domains that policymakers and practitioners consider in the young person's life and pathway plan to leave care and transition to adulthood.

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Questions

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