Effectively preparing young people to transition from out-of-home care
An examination of three recent Australian studies

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International research consistently depicts young people leaving out-of-home care (care leavers) as being particularly disadvantaged and as having significantly reduced life chances (Munro et al., 2005; Stein, 2008). This is not to suggest a simplistic causal relationship between any experiences of state care and poor later outcomes—care leavers are a heterogeneous group, and have varied backgrounds and experiences. But pre-care experiences of abuse and neglect, combined with poor in-care experiences, accelerated transitions to adulthood, and a lack of ongoing support after leaving care, make many of them vulnerable to a number of poor outcomes.

It is generally accepted that three key reforms are required to improve outcomes for care leavers: improving the quality of care, providing a more gradual and flexible transition from care, and having more specialised after-care supports (Stein, 2004, 2008). This paper examines findings from three recent Australian-based studies that focus on young people's transition from care, and particularly their preparation for moving out from the placement into transitional or half-way supportive arrangements. These studies suggest an association between good preparation for leaving care and positive post-care experiences.

Preparation for adulthood is generally defined as the development of practical, emotional and interpersonal living skills that enable us to cope physically and emotionally and form effective social relationships (Dixon & Stein, 2005; Pinkerton & McCrea, 1999). Most young people acquire these skills gradually over time, with the support of their parents and extended family. In contrast, many young people leaving state out-of-home care experience rapid, uneven and compressed transitions to adulthood whereby they have to attain independent housing; leave school; move into further education, training or employment; and in some cases become a parent—all at the same time, and at a much younger age than their peers. This transition from care needs to become a gradual and flexible process based on levels of maturity and skill development,
Compared to most young people, care leavers face particular difficulties in accessing educational, employment, housing and other developmental opportunities.

Preparation for leaving care in Australia

Child protection in Australia is the responsibility of the community services or child welfare department in each state and territory. The eight child welfare departments have their own legislation and policies, and consequently there are no uniform in-care or leaving-care standards, although the national out-of-home care standards introduced in December 2010 suggest a minimum benchmark (Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs [FaHCSIA], 2010a). The wide variation between the states and territories raises serious equity issues as it means that Australian care leavers receive different levels of support depending on their place of residence. Further, it also creates complications for young people who shift from one jurisdiction to another. In addition, the existence of state and territory rather than national responsibility makes it harder for child welfare advocates to lobby for improved resourcing and a higher quality of service provision—separate campaigns have to take place in each state and territory to address legislative and program responses (Cashmore & Mendes, 2008).

There are currently over 35,000 children living in out-of-home care in Australia, of whom almost 94% live in home-based care (either foster or kinship care), and just over 5% in residential care. Since 2005, the number of children in out-of-home care has risen by 51% from 23,695 to 35,895 in 2010 (from 5 to 7 per 1,000 children) and it has been estimated that 2,695 children aged 15–17 years on care orders were discharged from out-of-home care in 2010 (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare [AIHW], 2011). Some of these young people stay in existing foster or kinship care placements, others return to their family of origin, and many appear to move into independent living. Because Australian jurisdictions do not officially trace or monitor the progress of care leavers, we have no precise figures as to how many young people fall into each category.

Yet local and international research consistently shows that care leavers form one of the most vulnerable and disadvantaged groups in society. Compared to most young people, they face particular difficulties in accessing educational, employment, housing and other developmental opportunities. Given their vulnerability, we should have better knowledge about their outcomes in key areas such as education, employment, health, housing, parenthood, substance use, social connections, and involvement in crime (Mendes, Johnson, & Moslehuddin, 2011).

Preparation for leaving care in the international literature

The United Nations SOS Children’s Villages International (2011) recommends that all young people in care should be assisted to develop social and life skills that will help prepare them to become self-reliant. This should include opportunities for formal and vocational education, a discrete support worker, and specialised services for children with special needs.

A number of international studies have examined the strengths and limitations of preparation for leaving care. These reports, which vary in the level of detail provided, identify a mixed quality of experiences in preparation for leaving care.

Knorth, Knot-Dickscheit, and Strijker (2008) reported on two preparation programs for young people leaving residential care in the Netherlands, called Exit Training and Work-Wise, which emphasise practical and social skills. Evaluation of these programs suggested that they had been effective in assisting young people with education and training, accommodation, and the development of positive social networks.

In contrast, a recent study of young people transitioning from care in 12 countries across Europe and Central Asia found limited evidence of satisfactory preparation for leaving care. For example, preparation for leaving care in Poland starts only two months prior to discharge, and Estonia has no national legislation providing for leaving-care preparation or after-care support. All countries provide some training in independent living skills, but access to
these programs and their quality seems to vary greatly (Lerch & Stein, 2010).

A number of UK studies have also found a range of strengths and limitations in leaving care preparation. During 1992-94, Biehal, Clayden, Stein, & Wade (1995) evaluated the outcomes of UK leaving-care schemes using semi-structured in-depth interviews with 74 care leavers, of whom 42 had received key worker support from specialist leaving care services and 32 had not (the comparison sample). The leaving care workers and social workers of these young people were also interviewed. The authors found that some young people, particularly those in long-term foster care, received solid and gradual training in practical and social life skills, and were encouraged to develop a range of relationships and networks outside the home. Conversely, those in residential care tended to only receive life-skills training at the time of transition, and were less likely to have had the opportunity to address their broader emotional and relational needs. The authors recommended that clearer procedures and guidance be developed in order to ensure consistency of life-skills training.

In an overview of policy and legislation in England, Stein and Wade (2000) reported continuing limitations in preparation for leaving care. Concerns included over-protective and inflexible placements, with attention only being given to practical living skills in the last few months before discharge. Conversely, examples of good practice cited practical skills being taught gradually, with the active participation of young people. The authors recommended that preparation be holistic, with a focus on a range of practical, emotional and interpersonal skills, including hygiene and diet; budgeting; shopping and cooking; education; and personal, family and cultural identity.

In October 2001, the English government introduced the Children (Leaving Care) Act 2000, which was followed by similar legislation in Northern Ireland and Scotland. This Act significantly extended the duties and powers of the earlier Children Act. Local authorities are now obliged to assess the needs—in health and development, education and training, employment, housing, financial support, family and social relationships, personal and professional support, independent living skills, and any legal or immigration matters—of all young people in care. They are also required to develop a Pathway Plan for young people in care at the age of 16 years to meet those needs and provide a clear road to independence. The Pathway Plan has to concentrate on helping young people build and maintain relationships, develop their self-esteem and identity, and acquire practical and financial skills and knowledge (Department for Education, 2010; Stein, 2004).

A study by Dixon, Wade, Byford, Weatherly, and Lee (2006) of the impact of the Children (Leaving Care) Act interviewed 106 young people and their leaving-care workers in seven local authorities. They found that most young people felt very well or quite well prepared for leaving care, although young people with a disability and those with emotional and behavioural difficulties felt less so. The areas of particularly good preparation that they identified included having a healthy diet, having good personal hygiene, knowing about safe sex and managing substance use. Care leavers had received help with their preparation from a wide range of people, including family members, foster carers, and health and welfare professionals. Most of the young people had also had a formal leaving-care review and a comprehensive assessment of their needs prior to discharge.

Dixon and Stein (2005) conducted a national policy survey of Scottish local authorities, and case studies of three local authorities, including consultations with 107 young people and their main support workers. They identified a range of good and bad experiences of preparation for care. Most young people felt well-trained in practical and self-care skills such as cooking and shopping and health promotion, but there was less evidence of good preparation in

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The authors found a strong association between good preparation and a successful transition from care in terms of how well these young people were coping six months after leaving care. They recommended that all young people should have access to planned through-care programs that incorporate practical, emotional and interpersonal skills, and are responsive specifically to ethnic diversity and any physical or intellectual disability.

The National Care Advisory Service (2009), the national advice, support and development service for young people aged 13–25 years in and from care in England, has developed an interactive CD-ROM and website for their preparation to adult life resources. They recommend that all local authorities establish quality assurance processes for ongoing monitoring of the preparation of pathway planning for all young people in and leaving care.

In summary, there seems to be an association between good preparation for care, and better coping after care. Effective preparation seems to be particularly important for those young people with emotional and behavioural difficulties, those who have limited family and community connections, and those with a disability.

**Australian studies on preparation for leaving care**

A number of Australian studies have examined the strengths and limitations of preparation for leaving care. Some of these studies were conducted in one particular state or territory while others involved a national sample.

Owen and Lunken (2000) examined a sample of 138 case files randomly selected from the 989 young people aged 14–18 years who had been discharged from custody or guardianship orders (of at least six months’ duration) during a three-year period in the mid-1990s in Victoria. They found that fewer than half the young people in the study had received preparation in key aspects of independent living, such as education, housing, employment, budgeting, health and hygiene, and linking with supportive adults. However, on a more positive note, those moving into independent living were more likely to have had preparation in these key areas than those young people who remained with substitute carers or family. The report recommended that additional independent living skills training be provided for all care leavers.

London (2004) interviewed ten young people who had left care during the previous five years, together with 33 workers from a non-government organisation. The experiences of the young people varied from good to poor. The study cited a number of examples of good preparation, including assistance with housing and employment; obtaining finance to purchase items such as furniture and clothes; learning independent living skills such as cooking, budgeting, banking and sexual education; and getting help with acquiring personal identification documents. However, the study also reported that a number of the young people stated that they had not been given adequate assistance with housing, family relationships, accessing community resources such as food relief, and understanding the financial expenses involved in living independently. The consensus was that young people required more practical assistance in a range of areas, including living skills such as cooking, locating suitable accommodation, preparing a resume to access work or training, and understanding the challenges of living alone.

Another Victorian study by social work researchers and economists (Raman, Inder, & Forbes, 2005) estimated the costs of not supporting young people after they leave care. It was based on a purposive sample of 60 young people aged 18–25 years: 30 young people in a “positive outcome” group, and 30 young people who were unemployed and disconnected and whose circumstances and outcomes were less positive. This study also found a wide range of experiences. Twenty-
seven of the 60 young people (it is unclear from the study report whether they emanated from the positive or less positive sample group) had formal leaving-care plans that involved stable housing arrangements, such as living with a family member or friend, staying with their foster carer, accessing public housing, or residing in private rental accommodation. There seemed to be a positive association between this stability on leaving care and the education, employment, housing and financial outcomes for this group of young people. Conversely, one-fifth of the 60 young people had left care without any case plan for their future, and a third of them had a case plan that transitioned them directly into programs for those who are already homeless. These young people had poorer outcomes, including low levels of education or employment. In addition, 21 of the 60 young people (it is also unclear whether they emanated from the positive or less positive sample group) had participated in a preparation-for-leaving-care program. These programs varied substantially in both duration and content, but all but one of the participants described these programs as being at least somewhat helpful. These young people had better post-care outcomes in areas such as health and housing compared with those who had not participated.

A further study by Ombudsman Victoria (2010) was based on consultations with child welfare workers in government and non-government agencies and young people who had experience of living in out-of-home care. The report found evidence that some young people had little or no preparation for leaving care, and no leaving-care plan. Concern was expressed that these young people lacked basic independent living skills such as how to pay a bill or use a washing machine.

In a national study, Maunders, Liddell, Liddell, and Green (1999) conducted focus groups with service providers, and interviewed individual service providers and 43 young people across Australia aged 17–21 years who had been discharged at least two years earlier after six months or more in care between the ages of 15 and 18 years. Fewer than half of the young people (18) reported some form of formal preparation for leaving care, such as independent living programs, and more than half of that group (11) still felt they had not been well prepared. The report recommended that preparation should include living skills programs, help with accommodation, and assistance with developing personal support networks and mentors so that on leaving care young people were not left alone and isolated.

The CREATE Foundation, a national advocacy organisation for children and young people in care, surveyed state and territory government departments and a total of 471 young people, consisting of 196 who had already left care, and 275 who were approaching the age when they would be leaving care (McDowall, 2009). The survey reported that although all Australian jurisdictions require young people to have a leaving-care plan, there was a gap between the rhetoric and the outcomes. Only 36% of the young people reported having a formal leaving-care plan, and 22% had received no preparation. Of those who had a plan, some reported good experiences, but others found the plans were not helpful in areas such as housing and finances. The young people recommended face-to-face delivery approaches through practical skills programs or mentoring, rather than Internet-based information packages.

A further CREATE Foundation study (2010a), based on consultations with a smaller group of young people (27 members of their Youth Advisory Groups and 10 delegates of their National Youth Advisory Council), also found some deficits in preparation. The study identified a successful transition from care as including an individualised leaving-care plan that is regularly reviewed, a contingency plan if circumstances change, and the active participation of young people. Conversely, poor transitions involved an absence of individualised plans and a lack of participation by young people.

The most recent CREATE study (McDowall, 2011) surveyed 605 young people aged 15–17 years who were approaching transition from care, and found that only 190 (31%) had a final or even an incomplete leaving-care plan. There was also significant variation between jurisdictions. The study recommended that new initiatives be undertaken to raise the awareness of caseworkers about the needs of young people preparing to transition to independence.

The findings of these state and territory and national studies suggest that the quality of preparation for leaving care in Australia is inconsistent, and varies both within and across the different states and territories, as well as within non-government organisations. These concerns have been recognised by the Australian Government, which introduced national out-of-home care standards in December 2010 (FaHCSIA, 2010a). These standards include a requirement that all young people have a transition-from-care plan commencing at 15 years of age. The plan,
which is to be reviewed annually, is required to include proposed assistance with housing, health, education and training, employment and income support. Funding was provided to the CREATE Foundation to implement a “What’s the Plan?” campaign with government and non-government child welfare agencies to ensure that all young people in care have a leaving-care plan (CREATE Foundation, 2010b). The Community and Disability Services Ministers Advisory Council agreed in February 2011 to promote a nationally consistent approach to leaving-care planning that aligns with the national out-of-home care standards (FaHCSIA, 2011).

A related national government document provides a detailed outline of what should be included in preparation and planning (FaHCSIA, 2010b). Reference is made to meeting the individual needs and circumstances of the young person and constructing the transition to independence as a gradual process: commencing preparation well before the young person leaves care; including therapeutic support for those young people who have unresolved anger or grief and loss; actively involving the young person in defining their leaving-care needs; and developing a user-friendly leaving-care plan that addresses the core issues of housing, education, training and employment, and living skills (including budgeting, cooking and driving lessons), and provides access to health services, income support, and reconnection with family where possible.

Three Australian studies and their findings

Although Australian and international research suggests a lack of consistency in the assistance that young people receive to prepare them for leaving care, it has generated only limited knowledge of what works in preparation for leaving care, and the links with later outcomes for young people (Dixon et al., 2006). More recently, three qualitative Australian studies have provided useful data that can assist in identifying what constitutes effective or poor preparation.

Care leavers in Victoria and Western Australia

In the first study, Johnson et al. (2010) undertook in-depth interviews with 77 young people who had been in state out-of-home care in Victoria and Western Australia in inner city, suburban and regional locations. The study’s principal focus was on their housing experiences and needs, but also included a number of questions about their experiences in care and on leaving care. In the interviews, the young people discussed their housing and life experiences, with reference to their emotional responses and interpretations, but also in light of their interaction with broader social structures and institutions.

Participants were recruited from agencies working with at-risk and homeless young people and had to satisfy three criteria to be included in the study: a) they had been in care at some stage in their lives; b) were no longer in care; and c) were between 18–25 years of age. Participants were on average 20.5 years old when interviewed. Most were single (72%) and a small number (10%) had children. Young women constituted 60% of the sample. On average, participants had entered care at an early age (9 years), and had been in care for four years.

The authors argued that care leavers travel on one of two housing pathways when they leave care. The first (18 young people: 23% of the sample) the authors termed a “smooth” transition from care, with the young people transitioning into relatively secure and stable housing; and the second (59 young people: 77% of the sample), a “volatile” transition, whereby the young people had transitioned into housing instability or outright homelessness. Of this latter group, over half later succeeded in improving their housing and general life circumstances.

The study indicated that despite travelling quite different pathways from care, the majority in both groups felt somewhat or very prepared in the development of key living skills such as shopping, cooking, cleaning and taking care of a house, and living alone. Those who recalled specific learning opportunities tended to have had stable foster care or other living arrangements, and were able to learn from their carers as part of their everyday lives. However, only a minority felt confident in managing money, which the authors argued can be hugely detrimental to accessing and maintaining stable accommodation. For example, one young person from the smooth pathway, who had a close and supportive relationship with her partner’s family, commented:

Like I said, I had no one from the welfare really there showing me, you know, how to do all these different things. I mean, my partner’s mum has basically been my mum. Because she showed me everything to do with the household, to do with the jobs, to do with everything else. She’s still doing it. (p. 33)
But conversely, one young person from the volatile pathway who was homeless, commented:

Looking back, I could have used a lot more help than I got . . . teach you to pay bills, teach you how to pay rent, teach you how to budget, and support you until you are ready to live independently. (p. 33)

The authors found that 35% of the young people felt adequately prepared to access employment, and only 31% felt adequately prepared to access accommodation. The lack of attention to addressing the housing needs of the young people was a major deficit that exacerbated the challenges involved in accessing and maintaining housing. In contrast, a much higher proportion felt they had been well prepared to locate social/material resources and welfare assistance (59% and 73% respectively).

More crucially, both states from which participants were recruited have a legislative requirement that care leavers have a transition plan, yet only 20 of these 77 young people seemed to have had a leaving-care plan. For some of the young people, leaving-care plans were instrumental in assisting them to access crucial resources and developmental pathways.

A further point made by the report’s authors was that having a plan did not in itself mean that young people had been given adequate preparation for living independently, given that one-quarter of the young people on the volatile pathway had a plan. Some stated that plans were developed without their active participation, involved little more than ticking boxes, and/or recommended inappropriate or unwanted forms of accommodation. One young person from the volatile pathway who was homeless recalled:

They try to offer me places like a refuge. I've got to share a room. I'm not going to a refuge. I'd rather go on the street. And then they say, well, you're just ungrateful. (p. 31)

Appropriate housing is a crucial resource that can strengthen care leavers’ capacity to make a smooth transition, but it is evident from this study that it often remains a secondary consideration in the planning process, or is not adequately addressed in those leaving care plans that are prepared. In addition, the failure to include young people in planning ignores the point that young people do better when they feel they have a choice and feel actively engaged in the process. A meaningful leaving-care plan needs to do more than just list aspirations or options—it must offer a concrete plan of action that specifies how a care leaver can avail themselves of housing, training, employment, state support, health and other services. The plan must be supported by caseworkers who provide periodic follow-up and ensure accountability for implementation throughout the leaving-care process. But perhaps, most importantly, transition planning must involve the young people themselves in order to produce effective outcomes in housing and other areas.

The authors concluded that levels of planning and preparation for leaving care were uneven. Those in the smooth transition pathway seemed to have been more involved in the planning process (but often informally), left care at a later age, and had access to suitable housing and support resources. In contrast, those who experienced a volatile transition seemed to have had particularly limited preparation, and often left at a younger age and in crisis.

Care leavers in urban and rural Victoria

The second study was undertaken by Moslehuddin (2010). He undertook 20 in-depth interviews with care leavers in Victoria aged 18–26 years, consisting of 12 females and 8 males who were connected to non-government child welfare agencies. Out of these 20 respondents, 11 were from rural Victoria and nine were from the Melbourne metropolitan area. Qualitative interviews were used to obtain a greater understanding of the life circumstances of the care leavers. Questions focused on their pre-care experiences, their in-care experiences, their transition from care experiences, and their post-care outcomes.

Moslehuddin (2010) found that four of the young people felt adequately prepared for leaving care. Those four had enjoyed stable
placements, received ongoing support from their carers or agency workers, secured stable housing, and generally coped well with the transition. These young people felt accepted and valued by their carers and agency workers, which facilitated a smooth transition to independence. Furthermore these young people were found to have achieved better outcomes in education, training and housing following discharge from care.

One of them commented:

I do not think there is a better way because of the fact that my foster parents had done everything they could, for the better. They actually spoke to me about things, they explained things that I needed to know and, yes, they treated me like part of the family. (p. 161)

Another commented:

I can only say good things about the agency. They’re fantastic, their organisation and my social worker from them was brilliant, absolutely brilliant. And he helped me plan everything, like he said, “We got this funding for you to move out. What do you need and where are we going to get it?” (p. 161)

In contrast, the other 16 young people reported a range of problems and unhelpful experiences concerning preparation, including limited independent living skills, little opportunity to be involved in the discharge process, lack of emotional preparedness and maturity, and the absence of basic necessities including housing. Many felt confused, uncertain and scared, which negatively affected their ability to successfully transition to independence.

When asked how well they felt prepared, one young person commented:

Not very well at all. Like, I did not really have anything to move into a house. I did not really know how to budget that well or anything like that. I did not know the different places that I could go to get help when I did need it. (p. 160)

Another stated:

I wasn’t prepared at all. I had no knowledge of independence, no knowledge of budgeting, no knowledge of how to live. I could not even look after myself, couldn’t even shower myself or I was just, hygienically, could not do that sort of stuff. I did not even know the first thing about moving out by myself. (p.160)

Another young person commented:

I was scared. I was very scared actually, because I did not know who was going to take care of me. So, like, I was pretty depressed. I could not take care of myself at that point in my life. (p. 159)

Not only did these young people feel unsupported by their carers and workers, they also felt rejected by those who assumed a responsibility for their care and protection. These unhelpful experiences were found to be still unresolved for some young people at the time of interview, and therefore continued to have adverse effects on their ability to successfully transition to independence.

Care leavers in rural Victoria

The third study (Mendes, 2010) involved interviews with 19 young people aged 18–22 years who had left care in rural Victoria. Nine were female and ten were male. In-depth, semi-structured interviews using both closed and open questions were used to uncover the following information: age at and reasons for entering care; out-of-home care experience; preparation for leaving care; transition from care; post-care experiences, including accommodation; education, training and employment; self care, financial support and independent living skills; personal and social support/networks; emotional and mental health; particular issues confronting care leavers in regional, rural or remote settings; and overall reflections on leaving-care programs and supports.

Approximately 40 young people receive support annually from a rural leaving-care and after-care support service. The 19 interviewees were chosen purposively from this service on the basis that they had recently commenced involvement in either the employment and/or mentoring program, and one of the aims of the research was to evaluate the impact of those new programs.
Thirteen of the 19 young people recalled having a leaving-care plan and/or review meeting. But only five of them stated the plan or meeting was of value to them. One made no comment as to the value of the plan, and seven said it was of no value to them, with one young person commenting:

Because nothing that is written on them ever gets done. I don’t see the need for wasting that much paper. (p. 43)

The overall level of preparation for leaving care seemed to vary from poor to good. Most of the interviewees described the agency as playing a positive role in assisting them during the leaving-care process. Examples of assistance cited included help to access accommodation, progress educational opportunities, organise driving lessons and purchase groceries; being taken to medical appointments; talking through issues; and general personal support. Those with learning or intellectual disabilities required additional support to develop independent living skills.

A number of young people received direct assistance from their carers:

I must admit the preparation took five months. What happened is, I used to live at a foster home. They used to get me to cook, wash my clothes, make my bed and do my ironing, and it just kept going on as a normal grown-up. A normal mother, a father, whoever you want to call it, used to do that, and that’s what they would teach me. And once I got that confidence, it used to pick up all the time, even though I went slow. But I still got there. (p. 42)

However, a number stated that they were frightened and unprepared when they moved into independent living. One young person said:

I was scared stiff. I've always had other people around, and when I first moved out I was in the house by myself. Every sudden noise during the night was like, "What was that?!" And I got a little bit paranoid, so I would sleep all day and stay up all night. (p. 46)

Another young person wanted to live independently and was rapt to be leaving the care system. But she now admits that she wasn’t “prepared enough to be on my own. I went downhill straight away. I had nobody to help” (p. 46).

Discussion and implications for policy and practice

The findings from these three Australian studies are congruent with those of earlier Australian and international studies concerning preparation for leaving care.

Those young people who felt adequately prepared tended to have received ongoing support from foster carers or other supportive adults. They were more likely to have had a stable placement, to have been gradually introduced to independent living skills, to have been actively involved in the preparation planning, and to have left care at a later age. These young people were more likely to travel a smooth pathway into ongoing housing.

In turn, those young people with poor preparation seem to have had greater placement instability, had little if any participation in the planning process, received limited training in key independent living skills such as budgeting and hygiene, and left care at an earlier age when they were not emotionally mature, often without an organised housing pathway.

Although the national out-of-home care standards require all young people at 15 years of age to have a leaving-care plan, many of the young people in these studies, who admittedly left care prior to the introduction of these standards, did not have a formal plan. While there was some association between leaving-care plans and good preparation, having a plan was not in itself a guarantee of adequate preparation. Plans clearly need to incorporate practical strategies for action that provide care leavers with realistic and supported pathways into adulthood. They also need to include extra assistance, particularly in terms of independent living skills and housing provision, for those young people who experience unstable and unsupportive placements.

This overview has obvious limitations. The three Australian studies described in detail here elicited only a limited amount of data on young people's preparation experiences, and the small samples consulted are not representative of all young people transitioning from care in Australia. Consequently, there are limits to their generalisability. Nevertheless, the findings do suggest that there is a strong association between the quality of preparation for transitioning from care, and the ability of young people to cope effectively post-care. It also seems that effective preparation is particularly important for those young people who lack stable and supportive family and community connections while in care.

At the very least, preparation for all care leavers should include the following:

- start the planning for leaving-care process early, and well before the planned date of discharge;
- promote the active participation of young people in the preparation process;
- include the preparation of a leaving-care plan or review meeting;
provide access to independent living skills training, with levels of support tailored to reflect individual needs, including additional support for those with behaviour or substance abuse problems; and
develop a detailed leaving-care plan that includes well-defined accommodation arrangements, and an ongoing process of assessment and monitoring.

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