



In between formal and informal: Staff and youth relationships in care and after leaving care



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ABSTRACT

This paper deals with the contact and relationship youth have with staff while in care and after emancipation and examines the young adults' needs in contacting staff after leaving care. The study was conducted through 60 interviews with young adults ages 21–26 who emancipated from residential settings in Israel. Results showed that most youth report having had a meaningful staff member in care and that 62% were in contact with staff after their transition to independent living for both emotional and practical needs that could not always be answered by staff. One of the study's conclusions is that despite their departure staff's relationship with these young adults continues informally years after. However, without formal recognition of the place staff have in the lives of aged-out youth, no resources are invested in training them to properly meet the young adults' needs. The discussion highlights the need for an integrative approach that sees residential settings and staff as a meaningful part in the continuity from care to independent living by supporting aged-out youth's gradual transition to adult life.

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1. Introduction

Youth in residential settings in Israel live away from their families. The closest adult figures to them are staff members, with whom they form close relationships, and who provide for their emotional, educational, social and functional needs (Grupper & Romi, 2011). With little support from their families and no formal policy to support young adults during transition from care to independent living and very few programs and services designed for them (Benbenishty, 2008), it can only be expected that after emancipation these young adults would reach out to their former staff members for support and guidance. An earlier study found that out of 96 young adults who left care above age 19, about 50% cited adults encountered through the child welfare system (i.e., program staff member or therapist or foster mother) as supportive after emancipation (Collins, Spencer, & Ward, 2010). Therefore, the present study examines young adults' perspectives on their relationships with their meaningful staff members while in care and their contact with them after leaving care.

As youth leave care at the age of 18, they enter their emerging adulthood, which is characterized by many changes in residence, employment, education and romantic relationships (Arnett, 2007). The complex and challenging tasks of this period are enhanced for youth in care due to their lack of sufficient family backing and the difficulties in parting from their closest friends and staff and readjusting to

independent living (Sulimani-Aidan, 2014). Therefore, this paper also examines the needs and type of support these young adults in Israel seek as they reach out to their former staff members after leaving care. Examining the relationships youth in care have with staff both in care and after, and their needs for reaching out to their former staff's support and guidance, could help us learn about the formal relationships staff establish with youth in care and the informal relationships they have after leaving care. This could deepen our understanding of these young adults' needs during the transition to adult life and the role of staff in accommodating those needs.

1.1. Out-of-home placements in Israel

Out-of-home settings in Israel are designed for children and youth who experienced various degrees of abuse and neglect, but are also designed to promote the integration of underprivileged and vulnerable children from immigrant families and those from the geographical or social periphery of Israel (Mash, 2001). Of a population of 2.1 million Israeli children and youth, about 34,000 are living in treatment-oriented and educational-oriented residential settings (National Council for the Child, 2009), depending on their family background, personal characteristics and needs. One of the most prevalent out-of-home settings is treatment-oriented facilities that are supervised by the Ministry of Welfare and are based on professional and/or court decision. These facilities are divided into remedial, rehabilitation or post-hospitalization institutional settings (about 10,000 children and youth). The other prevalent

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out-of-home settings are the educational residential settings (youth villages) that are supervised by the Ministry of Education (about 24,000 children and youth). In this type of settings, placements are mostly voluntary (unlike treatment-oriented facilities, where local welfare committees decide to remove the child from home with the permission of their parents, or through protective court orders, in case of the parents' refusal). Despite the differences in type of settings and youth's characteristics, all youth in these settings come from families who lack social capital. Therefore, these residential settings are aimed at giving children a new chance in a place that separates them from the negative influence of their original family environment (Kashty, Gruper, & Shlasky, 2008).

Each year, several thousands (about 6000) of these youth leave these residential settings to begin their journey to adulthood at age 18. From this point they are no longer under the responsibility of the Welfare Ministry nor the Education Ministry (Zilka & Shuman, 2003). Studies that have investigated the situation of care leavers in Israel indicate that in many areas they face challenges and difficulties similar to those leaving care in other countries and that their outcomes are poor. Similar to other young adults who left care, they also achieve low educational achievements, struggle with economic and employment difficulties, and are more involved with criminal activities (Cashmore & Paxman, 2006b; Courtney & Dworsky, 2006; Shimoni & Benbenishty, 2011; Stein, 2012; Sulimani-Aidan, Benbenishty, Dinisman, & Zeira, 2013; Weiner & Kupermintz, 2001).

Due to this evidence, during the last decade the Israeli care system has gradually become aware of the needs and special circumstances of those leaving care and the importance of helping them integrate effectively into society. Hence, several services and programs were designed to help young adults who are about to leave care and those who emancipated. However, there is no formal policy to support their transition to adulthood and only scarce services for the most vulnerable young adults who entirely lack family backing. This leads to major differences both in awareness and in resources each facility invests in youth after emancipation (Benbenishty, 2008).

Placements in Israel are relatively stable compared with other countries. The average length of stay is nearly three years (RAF surveillance system, 2014). Youth who are about to leave care do so after establishing rather long relationships with staff, and most often the out-of-home setting is a second home to them, and in some cases the only home. Similar to other countries, after leaving care at the age of 18, these young adults are forced to take responsibility in multiple areas of their life in a short and rapid period with little support (Stein, 2012). Therefore, the contact with staff in their former residential setting could play a meaningful role in the crucial transition to independent living. Indeed, prior to emancipation youth are usually invited to stay in contact and reach out in case of need, but there is no structured program within the residential settings to support this contact and very little initiative on the part of staff to contact the young adults after they emancipated. In addition, since in Israel there are so few formal services that are designed to support these young adults, their former out-of-home setting is sometimes the only place they can turn to for support and guidance (Benbenishty, 2008; Grupper & Romi, 2011). However, very little is known about the type of relationship youth who left care in Israel maintain with their former staff in their adulthood. Therefore, one main goal of this paper is to examine whether young adults stay in contact with their former staff after they leave care and what their needs are for reaching out after their emancipation. Examining both the degree of contact these young adults have with their residential setting staff and the reasons for this contact could broaden our understanding of the role staff play after youth emancipate, and help us learn more about the needs these young adults have during the transition to adult life.

1.2. Staff in residential settings in Israel

Youth in residential settings in Israel interact daily with various staff members. The organizational model of the most prevalent out-of-home

settings in Israel – treatment-orientated facilities and educational facilities (youth villages) – includes three core domains: educational, therapeutic and social, each with professional staff members that support and counsel the youth (Benbenishty, 2008). The educational domain includes teachers (especially when the school is located inside the youth village); the therapeutic domain includes social workers and therapists (psychologist, drama therapist, art therapists etc.); and the social domain includes social counselors who must reside within the residential setting.

Guided by an integrative educational-therapeutic approach, all staff members work together as a milieu in order to provide for the youth's emotional, educational, social and functional needs. However, the social counselors interact most intensively with the youth day and night. Counselors help youth with their daily routines and chores, provide them with educational and enriching activities, and help them with emotional difficulties, personal problems and conflicts with their peers and their biological families (Grupper & Romi, 2011). It is important to notice, however, that among all staff members, counselors are the ones who most often lack formal professional training.

Staff's central role in the lives of youth in care also became evident from young adults' perspectives in earlier studies in Israel. For example, retrospective studies showed that all young adults who left care had staff members with whom they had formed a meaningful relationship (Sulimani-Aidan, 2016). In addition, separation from staff was perceived as one of the most difficult challenges in transition from care to independent living (Sulimani-Aidan, 2014).

Studies that examined the factors that contribute to better outcomes in adulthood of aged-out youth focused among other things on the role of staff. These studies showed that the relationships youth have with staff in care were associated with better adjustment after leaving care (Cashmore & Paxman, 2006a; Schofield & Beek, 2005). For example, young adults who reported higher support from staff reported fewer suicidal thoughts or attempts, and broader social support 4 to 5 years after leaving care (Cashmore & Paxman, 2006a). However, these results are not consistent, as other studies did not find any association between staff-youth relationships and better outcomes after the transition from care to adulthood (Dixon, 2008; Schiff, 2006; Schiff & Benbenishty, 2006; Sulimani-Aidan et al., 2013; Weiner & Kupermintz, 2001). These mixed results might also have to do with the differences between studies in relation to the participants they examined (case-worker perspectives versus youth perspective), type of outcomes in focus both in care and after, or the professional staff that was examined (social workers/counselors/foster parents, etc.).

Despite the central role staff has in the lives of youth in care, only one study in Israel had previously examined youth's perspectives on their meaningful staff members (Sulimani-Aidan, 2016). Therefore, another goal of this paper is to examine who the most meaningful staff member is for youth in care; the reasons for their importance, and whether these relationships last beyond care. Examining these questions from young adults' point of view could expand our knowledge of the role staff play in forming meaningful relationships in care and broaden our understanding about the factors that might strengthen the correlation between staff and youth's outcomes while in care and after emancipation.

1.3. Research questions

With an aim to learn more about youth-staff relationships after leaving care and care leavers' needs in reaching out to staff after emancipation, we first examined their relationships and the role the meaningful staff member played in the youth's life while in care. We further examined whether the young adults were still in contact with staff after leaving care and for what reason. Therefore, the research questions were as follows:

In-care relationships:

1. Who was the most meaningful staff member to the young adults in care?

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