

**Care-experienced youth and positive development: an exploratory study into the value and use of leisure-time activities**

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**Care-experienced youth and positive development: An exploratory study into the value and use of leisure-time activities**

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**Abstract:**

Numerous youth development outcomes are thought to ensue from participation in ‘positive’ activities (including leisure activities), yet little is known about how care-experienced youth access and benefit from such activities. Underpinned by a positive youth development perspective and informed by the socio-ecological model, this study aimed to: (1) identify how care-experienced youth spent their leisure-time and what shaped their participation; and (2) explore how care-experienced youth think leisure-time activities contributed to their positive development. A questionnaire, designed to capture a quantitative appreciation of care-experienced youths’ leisure-time activities and a qualitative understanding of their experiences, was distributed in the North of England. Descriptive statistics were generated from the quantitative data of 86 questionnaires, while a concurrent inductive and deductive content analysis was applied to the qualitative responses. Sport/physical activities were the most frequently engaged in activities, during leisure-time, with sedentary, self-directed activities also reported. Care-experienced youth identified that engagement in sport/physical activities developed confidence, competence, character and connections, while arts-based activities provided an opportunity to be creative and engage in self-management. Positive peer and adult relationships were viewed as central to securing positive outcomes, but care-experienced youth felt they faced notable challenges in this respect. Finally, implications for practice are considered.

**Keywords:** *care-experienced youth; leisure-time; physical activities; positive youth development; socio-ecological model*

## Introduction

Article 31 of The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations General Assembly, 1989 p. 9) states that all children have the right ‘to rest and leisure, to engage in play and recreational activities... and to participate fully in cultural life and the arts’. Participating in play and recreation, or indeed engaging in arts and cultural activities, may be particularly problematic for care-experienced youth, who often face a host of additional issues that can mean their acute needs take precedence over many leisure-time pursuits (Quarmby & Pickering, 2016). Throughout this paper, the broad term ‘care-experienced’ is used, as an alternative to ‘looked-after’, to identify those children and young people who have, at some point, been removed from their family and placed in the care of local authorities<sup>1</sup>, with another family member, in foster care, a children’s home or in an adoptive placement (see Quarmby, Sandford & Elliot, 2018). Significantly, the numbers of care-experienced youth are growing internationally. In England, as of 31<sup>st</sup> March 2017, there were 72,670 children and young people living in care; a 3% increase from 2016 (Department for Education [DfE], 2017a).

Only a handful of studies have explored the leisure-time activities of care-experienced youth. It is worth noting however, that these have been undertaken across international contexts and have shown some consensus with regard to the issues highlighted (e.g., Hollingworth, 2012; Gibson & Edwards, 2015, 2016; Säfvenbom & Samdahl, 1998, 2000). For instance, in their Norwegian study, Säfvenbom and Samdahl (1998) found that adolescents (mean age 16.7) living in residential care engaged in more passive activities (e.g. watching TV/videos/movies or ‘doing nothing’) and fewer self-involving activities (e.g. having discussions, playing, acting or engaging in physical activities) during free-time than their non-cared for peers. In

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<sup>1</sup> Local authority is a term for administrative bodies in local government in the UK

their study, ‘free-time’ was defined as time outside of formal schooling, and the authors argued that self-involving activities were vital for helping care-experienced youth to develop positively and improve their confidence and communication skills (Säfvenbom & Samdahl, 1998). Similarly, Lipscombe, Farmer and Moyers (2003) stated that young people who spend their leisure-time in ‘positive’ activities have less time to become involved in antisocial behaviour; a common perception of how care-experienced youth are likely to spend their time (Prison Reform Trust, 2016). It would seem, then, that the opportunity to access constructive activities (including physical, cultural and creative activities) in their leisure-time could well be particularly significant for care-experienced youth; offering, as they do, opportunities for social interaction and positive development. This argument is expanded further in the following section. Responding to the limited literature in this area, and particularly the lack of youth-centred perspectives, this paper outlines an exploratory, small-scale study that sought to examine the leisure-time experiences of care-experienced youth in the North of England. The aims were twofold:

- Identify how care-experienced youth spend their leisure-time including what might shape leisure-time use and;
- Explore how care-experienced youth think leisure-time activities may contribute to their positive development.

For the purpose of this paper, we have adopted the term ‘leisure-time’. We take this to mean an individual’s free-time outside of formal schooling and, specifically what they choose to do during this time. Hence, structured or unstructured sporting or physical activities, arts and cultural activities may all take place during an individual’s leisure-time. In what follows, this paper first explores the effects on young people of being ‘in care’ and the associated calls for such individuals to engage in positive developmental activities, before discussing the literature around positive youth development more broadly.

### *Care-experienced youth and ‘positive’ activities*

Experiencing care can be a powerful determinant to a young person’s positive development. For example, care-experienced youth are identified as being a *vulnerable* group, with strong evidence suggesting they can often present with complex emotional and behavioural issues (DfE, 2017b; Evans, Brown, Rees, & Smith, 2017; Iwaniec, 2006a; 2006b). Adverse childhood events (such as trauma from familial abuse and/or neglect) which lead to them entering care may have numerous pervasive effects on later health and broader social and psychological wellbeing (Levy & Orlans, 1998; Dann, 2011). This can include limited stable relationships, attachment issues and a lack of resilience (Simkiss, 2015). Hence, care-experienced youth are four times more likely than their peers to have a mental health problem (Green, McGinnity, Meltzer, Ford & Goodman, 2005). This includes conduct and emotional disorders (anxiety and depression), hyperactivity and some less common conditions, including tics and eating disorders (Meltzer, Gatward, Corbin, Goodman & Ford, 2003). They are also at a higher risk of engaging in self-harm or aggressive/sexualised behaviours and have higher instances of substance abuse (Schofield et al., 2014; Stein, 2008). A recent report in England by the Prison Reform Trust (2016) identified that around half of children in youth custody have spent time in the care system. Worryingly, this accumulative disadvantage in earlier life can lead to problems in adult life (DiPrete & Eirich, 2006).

In recognition of this, various international government policies have called for care-experienced youth to engage in a range of activities that would elicit positive development. In England, for instance, recent policy suggests all care-experienced youth should ‘have access to positive activities such as arts, sports and culture, in order to promote their sense of wellbeing’ (Department for Education and Department of Health, 2015, p. 21). Similarly, the

National Standards for children in ‘out-of-home’ care in Australia states that youth in care should be ‘supported to participate in social and/or recreational activities of their choice, such as sporting, cultural or community activity’ (Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs & National Framework Implementation Working Group, 2011, p. 11).

Existing academic literature would certainly support these calls. For instance, Fraser-Thomas and colleagues (2005) suggest that some leisure-based, physical activities have the potential to enhance physical development and help facilitate normal growth and development in children and young people, while Hollingworth (2012) argues, more specifically, that arts-based activities that build competence may be important therapeutic provision for care-experienced youth. Similarly, it is thought that the arts and cultural activities (such as visiting museums) for care-experienced youth can enhance wellbeing and may facilitate the accumulation of cultural capital (Gibson & Edwards, 2016). Finally, it is argued that various leisure activities may build resilience and self-esteem (Gilligan, 1999) and help foster social development through enhancing positive peer relationships, promoting citizenship and supporting the development of teamwork and leadership skills (Hollingworth, 2012; Säfvenbom & Samdahl, 2000, Quarmby, 2014). Importantly, activities whereby young people are brought into contact with people (adults and peers) outside of the care system can give them a sense of achievement and enhance self-efficacy. As Martin and Jackson (2002) argued, due to the increased risk of disruption (e.g. from placement moves when in the care system), engaging with other young people and developing a network of supportive relationships is essential. While there remains a need to better understand how leisure-time use may lead to positive development for care-experienced youth, it is also important to

acknowledge the variation in care experiences and recognise that distinct activities may provide different benefits for those in alternative care contexts.

### ***Perspectives on positive youth development***

According to Damon (2004), children deemed to be ‘at risk’ (and in particular care-experienced youth) have traditionally been viewed from a deficit, problem-centered perspective. Here, a focus is given to the difficulties these young people might encounter while growing up. For care-experienced youth these problems, as outlined above, may include learning difficulties, antisocial behaviour, low motivation and achievement, and risk of neglect and abuse. In contrast to this problem-centered vision of youth that has tended to dominate professional fields, positive youth development (PYD) is a strengths-based perspective that positions young people as individuals in possession of resources to aid their own development, rather than as problems to be ‘fixed’ by others (Lerner, Brown & Kier, 2005). By focusing on the talents, skills, strengths and potential of each young person (Lerner et al., 2005), this perspective recognises that all young people have the potential for change (Armour & Sandford, 2013). Moreover, it is argued that maximising a young person’s potential is beneficial not only as a notable aim, but also as a means of pre-empting ‘destructive or antisocial tendencies’ that may occur if productive outlets are not available (Damon, 2004, p.17).

Armour and Sandford (2013) argue that the PYD perspective is helpful in that it views young people as being in possession of a range of resources – their strengths or ‘assets’ (borrowing from Lerner et al., 2005). It is suggested that developing these resources through productive activities can help contribute to a young person’s current and future wellbeing, by enhancing their resilience and potential to achieve (Damon, 2004). Moreover, by developing in a



productive manner, children and young people are thought to be able to better contribute to their own communities. Positive youth development certainly emphasises the value of context in relation to developing resources (Damon, 2004). For instance, the significance of positive relationships between young people and their communities is clearly identified within PYD literature. There are notable challenges here, perhaps, for those young people living in difficult circumstances (especially care-experienced youth) who may not be surrounded with a stable network of individuals or community structures. However, being able to develop the necessary resources to contribute to communities is dependent upon the quality of relationships developed within various activities that young people engage. Hence, PYD is concerned with the importance of social processes and the need to develop positive sustained relationships between young people and key adults (Armour & Sandford, 2013), which for care-experienced youth may be particularly problematic.

One particular framework of PYD, applied in this study to help identify how care-experienced youth make sense of the activities they engage in during their leisure-time, is the ‘5Cs’ model (Lerner et al., 2005). In this model, the Cs refer to *competence* (physical, social, academic skills), *confidence* (self-efficacy and self-worth), *character* (respect for society and cultural norms), *connection* (positive exchanges between social actors and institutions) and *caring* (empathy and sympathy) (Holt et al., 2017). These are deemed to be the central elements to a thriving young person and developing these 5Cs is thought to result in a sixth C, Contribution; the active participation in a variety of settings including the family, community and the institutions of a civil society (Lerner, 2004). Research suggests that there are three important features of activities that can help foster these elements in youth: (1) opportunities to build supportive relationships with adults, (2) opportunities to engage in leadership and, finally, (3) opportunities to practice life skills (Lerner, Bowers, Geldhof,

Gestsdóttir & DeSouza, 2012). When activities provide all three, positive youth development is thought to occur. Despite the prevalence of research in this area, few studies have, to date, applied the theory to the leisure-time activity experiences of care-experienced youth specifically, making this study a valuable addition to the literature.

## **Methodology**

It has been noted that research with care-experienced youth should begin by considering the unique complexities of their varying experiences (e.g. reasons for entering care and different types of care placements), but also recognise that certain subjective factors may be evident that affect their lives in similar ways (e.g. numerous adults with a duty of care to ensure their safety and wellbeing) (Quarmby, Sandford & Elliot, 2018). As such, this study adopted a critical realist philosophy (Bhaskar, 1975). From an ontological perspective, critical realism claims that reality is socially constructed, yet maintains that underlying structures and mechanisms of the real world might determine social action. In this context, it does not assume that a single truth exists about how care-experienced youth experience leisure-time activities. As noted previously, the focus in this exploratory study – undertaken in one local authority context – is therefore on discovery and interpretation of how care-experienced youth spend their leisure-time and how activities undertaken in their leisure-time (e.g. sports/physical activities, arts, cultural activities) may offer opportunities for positive development.

Engaging care-experienced youth in research is particularly problematic and often time-consuming. Literature has highlighted, in particular, the challenges of negotiating access, identifying relevant gatekeepers and securing informed consent (from both adults and young people) (e.g., Goredema-Braid, 2010; Heath, Charles, Crow & Wiles, 2007; Quarmby, 2014).

In addition, Woodhouse (2018) has noted that the overly-structured nature of their experiences means that care-experienced youth can often be resistant to types of data collection approaches that mirror ‘official’ structures (e.g. formal interviews). Given the aforementioned challenges, it was decided that the most cost and time-effective way of capturing data on leisure-time activities was through the creation and distribution of a questionnaire. It was intended that the use of a questionnaire with both open and closed questions would enable a descriptive, quantitative appreciation of the activities care-experienced youth engage in during leisure-time, along with a qualitative understanding of their experiences. It was also considered relatively unobtrusive and felt to offer opportunities for different levels of engagement by participants of varying ages.

### ***Questionnaire Design***

Questions were developed by the research team in line with the study’s aims and by drawing on relevant literature and experience. We also consulted with members of a local authority who engage with care-experienced youth on a regular basis. Staff at a local authority in the North of England considered the categories of questions (which included categorical questions but predominantly open-ended responses) and their appropriateness, before the questionnaire was piloted with five young people from the West Midlands. In order to ensure the questionnaire gathered responses relevant to the study aims, it captured data against four main sections: (1) what activities participants *used to do* in their leisure-time, (2) what activities *they do now* in their leisure-time, (3) what they would *like to do* in their leisure-time in the future, and (4) how they think leisure-time activities might contribute to their positive development. Based on feedback from local authority staff (concerning what was offered in that particular area) and the young people involved in the pilot, the different activities identified in the questionnaire included: arts, disability arts, dance, TV/film, music, drama,

sport, visiting museums or ‘doing nothing’. An option was available for participants to identify other activities if applicable. Each section of the questionnaire also asked participants to articulate, in written form, their experiences and offered ample space for respondents to add as much detail as possible/desired. In line with previous studies, leisure-time was clearly defined as time outside of formal school (Safvenbom & Samdahl, 1998) and what they chose to do during this time. Finally, to understand the characteristics of the sample, respondents were asked to provide anonymous demographic information including details of their age, sex and type of care placement. Within the introductory section of the questionnaire, all participants were informed about the purpose of the study. They were reminded that participation was entirely voluntary and that they did not have to take part and could withdraw at any point until the questionnaire was returned. At this point, responses would become anonymous. In addition, mindful of research suggesting that many care-experienced young people may have learning difficulties or additional needs (DfE, 2017b), and cognisant of the wide age range among potential respondents, carers or key adults were asked to help complete the questionnaire with young people who might require extra support.

### ***Questionnaire Dissemination***

Distribution of the questionnaire was organised through a local authority, whose members shared strategic responsibility for care-experienced youth in the region. Prior to the questionnaire being distributed, ethical approval was granted by both the lead author’s institution and the relevant local authority. To encourage responses, the questionnaire was distributed both in hard copy and online (via an editable PDF document due to data protection issues) to young people aged 5 to 18 years. The former was distributed via adult gatekeepers at care leaver events, while the latter was distributed via email through foster

carers, residential children's home managers and designated teachers<sup>2</sup>. The questionnaire took approximately 10 minutes to complete and in total, 86 questionnaires were returned (with demographics reported in the findings below).

### *Analysis*

Given the exploratory nature of the research, analysis focused both on descriptions of the quantitative and qualitative data. Initially, each questionnaire was read in its entirety with responses simultaneously being recorded in an Excel spreadsheet/database to ensure an overall understanding of each participant's responses (Sparkes & Smith, 2014). For the quantitative, responses, data was transferred to SPSS and analysed to generate descriptive statistics i.e. frequency and percentage counts were recorded in cross-tabulations.

As noted, one of the central aims of this study was to use PYD as an analytical framework for understanding how care-experienced youth perceive their leisure-time activities might contribute to their positive development. As such, we employed, what Sparkes and Smith (2014) refer to as abductive reasoning – a concurrent inductive and deductive content analysis relating to the qualitative responses (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The deductive analysis was used to identify responses that aligned with the aforementioned 5Cs of positive youth development (competence, confidence, character, connection and caring), while also considering what factors impacted the young people's engagements. Responses were also mapped to a socio-ecological model, which considers the interplay between individual, interpersonal, institutional, community and policy level influences on behaviour (McLeroy, Bibeau, Steckler & Glanz, 1988). Alongside this, an indicative analysis was used to explore themes not necessarily related to these frameworks. The concurrent inductive and deductive

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<sup>2</sup> Designated teachers are responsible for ensuring school staff understand what can affect how care-experienced young people learn and how the whole school supports the educational achievement of these pupils (DfE, 2018)

content analysis was conducted by the first and third author. After reading through the responses several times, meaning units, composing of keywords, phrases or sentences conveying a specific concept or idea that related to the research aims were identified. After completion of this initial stage, the first and third author met to discuss the emerging meaning units and to begin the process of organising. These meaning units were then clustered together and enabled the development of first order themes, which essentially represented a list of similar quotes emerging from the participants' responses. Relationships were then identified between first order themes with similar meanings and grouped together to form second-order themes. Where relevant these second-order themes were grouped again by meaning to form final, higher order (core) themes that represented the range and content of responses. Throughout this process, each meaning unit and first/second order theme was modified and refined on the basis of any subsequent cases as they were identified (LeCompte & Preissle, 1993).

## **Themes and discussion**

Of the 86 completed and returned questionnaires, the majority of participants (81%) reported living with a foster carer at the time of responding. Seven (8%) were in kinship care<sup>3</sup> and five (6%) were living with parent(s). Three (4%) were living in residential care and only one reported to be a care leaver (1%). In addition, over half of those who responded identified as male (63.5%). The age of respondents ranged from 5-18 years for males (mean age 10.39) and 6-18 years for females (mean age 10.29). No data was reported on ethnicity or whether participants had a disability/SEN due to the variation in who was completing questionnaires with the young person. Moreover, due to the low sample size and to help maintain anonymity of participants, postcode variation is not reported here.

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<sup>3</sup> Kinship care refers to the care of children by relatives or in some instances, close family friends

Analysis of the qualitative responses revealed 22 first order themes and six higher order (core) themes. These final six core themes relate to two broad areas of focus: (1) how leisure-time activities (particularly sport/physical activities) might contribute to positive development, and (2) what shapes engagement in leisure-time activities. The following section outlines these two areas. It first provides an exploration of what, how and where care-experienced youth reported spending their leisure-time; drawing upon both quantitative and qualitative data. This is then followed by a discussion of how the activities they reported (in particular sport/physical activities), can and do contribute to positive development and what shapes care-experienced young people's engagement in such activities. All qualitative data is presented anonymously alongside the age of the respondent and their care placement at the time of completing the questionnaire.

***'I just play in my garden or in my street': How and where care-experienced youth spent their free time***

It was evident from the descriptive data that the type of activities most frequently cited during leisure-time for both males and females (across all ages) were 'sports' (broadly defined and including physical activities) (males = 68.5%; females = 61.3%). After this, and similar to Säfvenbom & Samdahl (1998), males engaged in sedentary and often solitary, passive activities such as watching TV/films (33.3%) and listening to music (22.2%). In contrast, after sports, females used their leisure-time to dance (29.0%) and listen to music (29.0%) though 'doing nothing' was also regularly reported (22.6%). These findings are similar to those of Hollingworth (2012), who, reporting on interviews with 32 care leavers, found that the majority of participants recalled engaging in sports most often, with over a fifth recalling engaging in arts-related activities (e.g. music, singing and dancing).

The quantitative data also revealed that the majority of respondents reported engaging in activities with friends (males = 53.7%; females = 71.0%). Both males (53.7%) and females (48.4%) reported engaging in activities with siblings (including foster siblings). While many may not engage in activities with their parent(s) for valid reasons (e.g., care orders for abuse/neglect), just over a third of male respondents (38.9%) reported engaging in activities with adult carers in comparison to over half of females (51.6%). Ward and Zabriskie (2011) have argued that engagement and interaction in activities with family members helps develop meaningful relationships and develop a range of resources. This may not be the case for care-experienced youth though who lack the same stable family environment. As such, opportunities to engage in activities and develop relationships with other key adults (e.g. foster carers, mentors, youth workers, teachers or coaches) may be vital in fostering positive development among this population of young people (Holt et al., 2017). However, a third of males (31.5%) and a quarter of females (25.8%) involved in this study reported engaging in activities in isolation which, according to Lerner et al. (2005), would make it difficult to experience positive development since relationships through activities (as linked with the concept of Connection) are a vital developmental aspect.

Similarly, an emergent theme from the qualitative responses revealed that most participants engaged in activities within close proximity to home. For instance, many reported engaging in activities in their house, in the front/back gardens, in the street or in nearby parks or open spaces.

*In my free time I play in the front garden because it's the only place to play football*  
(Male, 12, foster care)

*I just play in my garden or in my street* (Female, 11, residential care)



Interestingly, very few respondents reported engaging in activities in school or within after-school clubs. A recent study examining the physical education and school sport experiences of care-experienced young people has also highlighted this lack of participation in sport and physical activity within the school context, noting that extra-curricular sport participation (in particular) is problematic (Woodhouse, 2018). In this study, logistics and placement location were identified as key barriers to participation, although it was also recognised that school was often a contentious place for care-experienced young people; making it somewhere they would not choose to spend additional time in. These findings echo previous literature, whereby it was reported that care-experienced young people in Norway spent fewer leisure-time situations in public spaces compared to their peers (Säfvenbom & Samdahl, 1998). Gibson and Edwards (2016) also suggest that participation in leisure-time activities may be a source of worry for those responsible for young people. Carers and social workers may therefore attempt to regulate their charges' behaviour by ensuring they spend their leisure-time close by (Gibson & Edwards, 2016). In addition to issues of access and logistics, it may be that regulatory issues associated with safeguarding also shape where young people are able to spend their leisure-time and, ultimately, the activities they engage in.

### ***'It helps build my confidence': Perceptions on positive development***

#### *An opportunity to develop the 5C's of positive youth development*

It was evident from the qualitative responses that engagement in certain leisure-time activities were beneficial for young people across a number of areas. Drawing on Lerner and colleague's (2005) 5Cs model of PYD, several young people reported how activities could help build or nurture various characteristics (assets). One of the most prominently reported characteristics here was *confidence*. Confidence reflects the development of a positive self-worth and self-efficacy and demonstrates an individual's belief in their capacity to succeed

(Lerner et al. 2005). In this study, many young people reported how leisure-time sporting activities, in particular, helped to build their confidence.

*I did swimming and got my gold in stage 8 and I was super proud of myself (Female, 14, foster care)*

*I do it [sports and dancing] because it helps build my confidence (Female, 12, foster care)*

*I would like to try rugby because I think it would help build my confidence and strength (Male, 12, kinship care)*

Developing confidence is particularly important for care-experienced young people who are often reported to have low self-confidence (Quarmby & Pickering, 2016). Similarly, developing *competence* was frequently cited as a key outcome of leisure-time activities. Lerner et al. (2005) suggest that competence broadly reflects the ability to act effectively in various social situations. Here, young people reflected on how activities enhanced their social skills and physical abilities:

*Swimming is something I enjoy doing and can see improvement weekly (Female, 9, foster care)*

*I want to go to majorettes. I can already do some stuff with the stick but if I go to it I can be even better (Female, 12, foster care)*

*Taking part in sports helps improve my teamwork and communication skills which is really useful in the future when we get jobs (Female, 16, foster care)*

Moreover, several of the older respondents (often those aged over 16) also referred to the development of what could be deemed ‘health competence’ – that is, using sport and various leisure-time physical activities to keep fit and remain healthy (Lerner et al., 2005).

*I cycle a lot in my free time. It's a good form of transport and, is free, and a good way to keep me fit (Male, 18, foster care)*

*Fitness training at the gym is good for me physically and emotionally (Male, 18, care leaver)*

*Swimming is really good because it helps me and going to the gym helps me stay healthy and helps with my body (Female, 14, foster care)*

*I like going to the gym because it makes me 'hench' (muscular) and I like having muscles... (Male, 16, foster care)*

The responses around health competence and the development of physical capital (in the form of muscular or defined bodies) related to engagement in sport/physical activities that young people undertook in their leisure-time and echo, to some extent, the discussion by Fraser-Thomas and colleagues (2005) who highlight the potential for such activities to enhance physical development.

Arguably, the largest volume of responses within the questionnaire related to how leisure-time activities provide opportunities for developing *connections*. This is perhaps not surprising since previous studies (e.g. Gilligan, 2000; Hollingworth, 2012; Murray, 2014; Quarmby, 2014) have highlighted the benefit of certain activities in developing social networks and providing opportunities for young people to connect with other young people, both within and beyond the care system.

*I really like it when I get to play football with my brother (Female, 9, foster care)*

*Fishing is relaxing, especially when I get to do it with my brother and sister (Male, 16, kinship care)*

*Youth clubs are my favourite activity because I can meet friends and go on trips (Male, 12, foster care)*

*I really like swimming because I have made a new friend (Male, 5, foster care)*

As well as allowing young people to develop friendships, as illustrated above, leisure-time activities also allow them to connect with ‘family’. Hence, these findings would seem to reinforce the potential of some leisure-time activities to allow young people to develop those connections and positive bonds with people and social institutions that are outlined above as being important for positive development (Lerner et al. 2005). These findings are not dissimilar to those of McClelland and Giles (2014) who reported that structured (i.e. programmed) leisure-time activities can act as an important vehicle for facilitating social interactions between marginalised individuals and members of the mainstream community. However, conversely, the finding reported earlier that care-experienced youth spend a substantial part of their leisure-time in isolation, can also be seen to make developing positive connections problematic. Certainly, Armour and Sandford (2013) suggest that for positive development to occur through sport/physical activity, young people need to engage in purposeful activities with others (in particular, with peers and constructive adults). This raises questions, perhaps, regarding whether simply engaging in unstructured leisure-time activities alone can usefully contribute to an individual’s positive development.

With reference to the PYD framework, some questionnaire responses highlighted a connection to principles and values, and thus reflected the development of individual *character* (Lerner et al. 2005). For instance, one 12-year-old female living in foster care spoke about how sport “*teaches you about rules and what’s right and wrong*”, while a 15-year-old male (also in foster care) suggested that sports taught him “*about sportsmanship*”. This resonates with a growing body of work on values-based education and the role of sport and physical activity as valuable contexts in which such socio-moral development can occur (e.g. McCuaig, Marino, Gobbi & MacDonald, 2015). Interestingly, there were no responses

that specifically reflected a sense of *caring* – of sympathy and empathy for others (Lerner et al. 2005) – perhaps reflecting the tendency towards isolated, self-directed, unstructured activities.

#### *An opportunity to develop personal characteristics*

A recent systematic review of literature suggested positive youth development outcomes fall into three distinct domains: personal, social and physical. As such, beyond the outcomes identified above that mirror the 5C's framework, care-experienced youth also identified a range of positive outcomes that align with the personal domain (Holt et al. 2017). Importantly, the majority of these responses related more to *arts-based activities* that young people engaged with in their leisure-time, rather than sport/physical activities. Initially, for instance, young people report that arts-based activities in their leisure-time allowed them the opportunity to be creative and engage in self-expression:

*I love art because I get to let out my negative feelings and gain the joy of creation  
(Male, 15, foster care)*

*Art and drawing because you can be creative (Female, 8, foster care)*

*I really like drama because I love being on stage and I love showing people what I  
can do. I can just express myself (Male, 10, foster care)*

Arts-based activities were a popular leisure-time activity for some care-experienced youth and allowed young people to engage in stress management: “*Singing because it calms me down and I love all of the songs*” (Female, 12, foster care). Arguably, for some, arts-based activities were more relaxing and a closer ‘fit’ with their personal interests and hence, more likely to afford them success/satisfaction and aid their overall wellbeing. That said, stress management was not just related to arts-based activities but some individual physical activities too:

*I go fishing on my own. I find fishing very relaxing (Male, 16, foster care)*

*Sometimes I do gardening - find it very relaxing (Male, 10, foster care)*

Either way, it would appear that these activities reflect the tendency for isolation or less social engagement in activity. This is somewhat contrary to the PYD literature that suggests building relationships as central to generating certain positive outcomes (Holt et al. 2017).

### ***‘I just don’t have the time’: Pressures on the use of free time***

One of the aims of the study was to identify what might shape leisure-time use for care-experienced youth and, as noted earlier, in order to map influences on respondents’ leisure-time, a socio-ecological model (McLeroy et al. 1988) was used as a lens through which to view the qualitative responses. This identified four levels of influence including individual, interpersonal, institutional and policy. At the *individual level*, young people identified low self-competence and confidence, a general disinterest and their own behaviour as barriers to them engaging in specific free time activities. For instance:

*I was just rubbish at guitar so I stopped playing (Male, 12, foster care)*

*I lost my confidence due to bullying and just didn't want to be in front of people because they will make fun of me (Female, 16, foster care)*

*I was asked to leave swimming because I was not safe as I didn't listen to instructions (Male, 6, foster care)*

These mirror findings from a recent review of literature (Quarmby & Pickering, 2016) whereby low self-competence, confidence and self-esteem have been reported to impact on care-experienced youths’ engagement in physical activities, which is somewhat ironic since increased confidence and competence are often reported outcomes of engaging in positive activities.

At the *interpersonal level*, care-experienced young people reported a lack of time and perceived lack of support to help them engage in structured activities in their leisure-time. With regard the former, many young people reported a lack of time, which may be a symptom of being in care and having to see various individuals for ‘check-ups’ (e.g. with personal advisors, social workers, designated nurses, independent reviewing officers etc.) during their leisure-time. However, further exploration is required to determine the extent/impact of such practices. In relation to the perceived lack of support, some spoke about parents being unable to support them due to their absence from their lives:

*Dad was always in prison, so no one can help me (Male, 13, foster care)*

More pertinent, however, were the responses that alluded to carers and social workers finding activities for them that they thought would be beneficial. However, these activities were rarely of interest to those who responded here and this often resulted in a lack of interest and disengagement over time:

*I used to do drumming, you know music, but stopped as I had done it for long enough,*

*I was bored and never wanted to do it in the first place (Male, 16, foster care).*

This is symptomatic of what Gibson and Edwards (2016) recently refer to as ‘facilitated engagement’. In their study, ‘everyday’ participation referred to activities that young people would choose to undertake in their leisure-time, e.g. shopping, playing, reading, membership-based activities etc. (Gibson & Edwards, 2016). On the other hand, ‘facilitated engagement’, referred to more formal structured activities, organised by and/or with the local authority, independent visitors<sup>4</sup> or carers. This may be particularly problematic with regard a young person’s positive development. For instance, Larson (2000) identified initiative as a key feature of positive development and highlighted three key constitutive elements in this respect (intrinsic motivation, concerted engagement, and progressive effort directed towards a

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<sup>4</sup> Independent visitors are volunteers, not connected to the local authority, who act as a mentor and support those young people in care

goal). He suggests that structured *voluntary* activities such as sports, arts, music, and hobbies offer the best contexts for initiative development, as they are voluntary (i.e. young people need to be intrinsically motivated), require attention (i.e. elements of challenge), and necessitate effort over time. He distinguishes how structured leisure activities such as sport (which require attention and effort over time and are also voluntary) differ from school engagement (which also require attention and effort over time but is mandatory) and television viewing (voluntary, but not requiring attention or effort over time). Larson's (2000) perspective has particular implications with regard to this study, given that some young people discussed a situation of facilitated engagement (Gibson & Edwards, 2016). Indeed, some respondents commented that their leisure-time activities were not always voluntary, nor of particular interest to them. This enforced, structured participation may thus restrict, rather than facilitate, the positive effects of engaging in such activities.

At the *institutional level*, other prominent themes to emerge were competing activities and to a lesser extent, financial constraints. With regard the former, a small number of participants commented about alternative activities; that is the activities they did were sometimes quite restrictive and therefore did not allow them to do other things. As such, to start a new activity they had to stop an old one: *"I don't do football anymore because I started doing drama"* (Male, 10, foster care). With regard the latter, participants reported that their carers may have struggled to pay for access to activities:

*I don't do these things anymore because [my carer] can't pay for them and has to look after my two cousins and my bus fare (Female, 10, foster care)*

*Financial restrictions now I live independently (Male, 18, care leaver)*

Finally, at a *policy level*, participants mentioned being placed in care and moving care home as particularly disruptive to their leisure-time activities, which reflects findings from several



recent studies (Hollingworth, 2012; Murray, 2014; Quarmby, 2014). In fact, the effect of placement moves may also disrupt the development of relationships, which as mentioned earlier, are essential to fostering positive development.

## **Conclusion**

This paper has examined how care-experienced youth make use of their leisure-time and considered if/how participation in constructive leisure-time activities (specifically sport, physical activities and arts-based activities) can aid their positive development and help them to build supportive relationships with peers and adults. The data point to various benefits from leisure-time activity participation, with the respondents identifying outcomes that relate to many of the 5Cs of Lerner et al's. (2005) model – specifically, competence, confidence, character and connection. The findings also note that relationships are an important – if not challenging – aspect of leisure-time activity participation. Recently, Holt and colleagues (2017) have also identified constructive adult and peer relationships as central to the positive youth development climate. However, they note that such relationships should sit alongside (and complement) positive parental involvement, which is somewhat problematic for care-experienced youth who, for various safeguarding reasons, may not be in a position to interact (or interact often) with their biological parents. This was evidenced to some extent within this study, with a number of respondents reporting that they engage in self-directed leisure-time activities (watching TV, listening to music) in isolation. Moreover, the tendency to engage in activities, more specifically sport/physical activities, close to 'home' (i.e. their care context) and less so in school or after-school clubs (where connections with others may form) is another indication that relationships may be problematic for this cohort of young people. It may also help to understand why the respondents in this study did not identify specific

benefits relating to the concept of ‘caring’ (sympathy and empathy for others), as articulated within the 5Cs model.

While relationships have been identified as vital in the wider youth development literature, there are also arguments that a PYD framework, as advocated by Lerner and colleagues (2005), does not necessarily account for all the complexities associated with more marginalised groups. For instance, it has been argued that marginalised groups, and care-experienced youth in particular, are likely to have more barriers to overcome than others (Blanchart-Cohen & Salazar, 2009). In addition, Ginwright and Cammarota (2002) have suggested that care-experienced youth may be more vulnerable to a range of ‘social toxins’ (e.g. violence, poverty, domestic and sexual abuse) that can affect healthy development. As such, they therefore suggest that a more complete model of PYD would also encourage young people to address the larger oppressive forces affecting them and their communities. This, however, could only be achieved through engagement in structured, leisure-time activities where reciprocal and trusting relationships with adults are developed. As noted above, accessing such contexts remains problematic for many care-experienced youth.

In many ways, this research reinforces the view expressed by others (e.g. Selwyn, Wood & Newman, 2017) that while the opinions of care-experienced youth bear many similarities with the general youth population, their distinctive context also shapes more specific challenges, experiences and perspectives. Importantly, in this provisional analysis of the leisure-time activities of care-experienced youth, by positioning the socio-ecological model alongside the positive youth development framework, a focus is naturally directed to the relationships that are established at varying levels (e.g. interpersonal, institutional, community) and how the 5Cs are (or can be) developed within and across these levels. That

said, further work is required here to consider the bigger picture across different care contexts. Nonetheless, these findings from a small-scale study have evident implications for practitioners and those who work with/for care-experienced youth. For instance, they point to the need for specific training/continuous professional development (CPD) for foster carers, social workers, independent visitors and residential children's home staff, among others, with regard to the value of leisure-time activities and the developmental benefits they can accrue from them. These benefits have the potential to transfer to other areas of care-experienced youths' lives and therefore training to help practitioners identify potential challenges around, and provide support for, access to developmental activities would seem to be essential.

While this paper draws on 86 respondents to a questionnaire, we recognise that a more authentic picture of their lives and experiences might be better constructed through further, in-depth dialogue with care-experienced youth. As noted above, this is important given the complexity of young people's lives and the multiple individuals and institutions that they engage with. Hence, future research should also aim to capture other markers of identity. For instance, socio-economic status (their location), ethnicity and special educational need and/or disability and explore whether these also mediate leisure-time use alongside their care status. It would also be useful for future research to distinguish between different age groups and if leisure-time is used/facilitated differently. Future work might also look to explore how leisure, in a more general sense, is valued by care-experienced youth as a time/space away from structured processes and practices that often dictate their daily lives. In keeping with the emerging literature that seeks to foreground youth voice in research with marginalised groups (Sandford, Armour & Duncombe, 2010), we are also engaged in further work that seeks to give greater consideration to the complex contexts that care-experienced youth find

themselves in. In so doing, we hope to provide a space for the many different *stories* of this particular group's engagements with various leisure-based activities.

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