The Importance of Friendships for Young People Transitioning from Care:
A Scoping Review of the Literature

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Introduction

It is well established that having a strong social network is incredibly important for facilitating a range of physical and mental health outcomes. Adequate social support has been linked with positive outcomes regarding depressive and anxious symptoms, loneliness, physical activity, health behaviours, and overall quality of life (Harandi, Taghinasab, & Nayeri, 2017; Reblin & Uchino, 2008; Wickramaratne et al., 2022; Wright, 2016). For most, a social network is varied and may include family, friends, coworkers, members of activities, and professionals in the community. This allows one to have a diverse group of people from which they can turn to for support when needed, with different people to fill different roles.

For young people in and leaving care, their social networks tend to be much smaller, often due to barriers put in place by the care system itself (Teer, 2021). Frequent moves and disruptions throughout a young person's life makes it more difficult for that young person to maintain informal connections, particularly with friends (Roesch-Marsh & Emond, 2021). Therefore, not only is a young person's social network often reduced after they are taken into care, but this social network suddenly primarily consists of professionals, foster carers, or other adult role models (Blakeslee & Best, 2019). While these adults still play important roles in the young person's development, the need to help young people in care maintain informal ties with peers is largely overlooked by the care system. Sometimes, fears around young people forming connections with peers who may encourage antisocial or risk behaviour (Rokven et al., 2017; Stritzel, 2022; Tome et al., 2012; Zapolski et al., 2019) overpowers the recognition that peer relationships are extremely important for a young person's development and their readiness to leave care (Potes, Dykes, & Carelse, 2022; Reuben, 2024; Teer, 2021).

Friendships are essential to normative social development for all adolescents and emerging adults. According to Erik Erikson's psychosocial development theory, during adolescence the principal focus of development is identity formation, or forming a strong sense of self in the context of one's wider social environment. Then into young adulthood, this shifts to intimacy versus isolation, prioritising one's need to form deep, emotional bonds with other people through close relationships (Erikson, 1963). Traditionally, peer relationships help adolescents figure out who they are and their role in a social group, allowing them to achieve both a consistent sense of self and how this identity interacts with others (Ragelienė, 2016). Further, a study by Mitchell et al. (2021) found a positive correlation between successful identity resolution in emerging adulthood and levels of intimacy in young adulthood. For young people in and leaving care, their current circumstances and past relational experiences may make it more difficult for them to resolve the problems Erikson states need to be overcome in each developmental stage.

Peer relationships may benefit care-experienced young people in many ways, particularly as they transition out of the care system and into independent living. Unfortunately for many leaving care, the support they receive decreases significantly once they are no longer in a foster placement or staffed accommodation (UK Government, 2022). This is when drawing on one's social capital often becomes necessary to meet essential needs and create life opportunities. Social capital refers to the interpersonal connections that may facilitate benefits for the individual (Janus, 2024). Social capital can be generated by strong ties, such as family members or close friends, or weak ties, such as coworkers or acquaintances. A person's social capital can be mobilised to meet needs and reach goals, whether that be having someone to

talk to, finding a job, accessing community supports, etc., and both strong and weak ties may be equally able to connect a person with opportunities. For young adults without adequate family support, friends may become especially crucial in securing the different kinds of social support that every person needs. The four main domains of social support include emotional (ex. empathy and care), instrumental (ex. resources such as housing or food), informational (ex. advice, sharing knowledge), and appraisal (ex. encouragement or other feedback about the person) (House, Umberson, & Landis, 1988).

Peer relationships have also been found to improve coping and increase resilience for young adults who have been in care and have had adverse childhood experiences. Friendships may provide important attachment relationships for those who have been in care and may have experienced considerable loss and disruption to their relationships (Maguire et al., 2024; Woodall et al., 2023). Through positive peer relationships, those in and leaving care may develop trust and the ability to form meaningful connections with other people (Roesch-Marsh & Emond, 2022). Further, much of the discourse around whether young people succeed after leaving care references resilience, however these discussions tend to frame resilience as an individual trait. However, some conceptualisations of resilience view it as an interpersonal resource, in which there is a reciprocal relationship between the individual and their environment, and this determines a person's ability to thrive after experiencing adversity (Paulsen & Berg, 2016; van Breda, 2023). Ultimately, the balance between personal, intrinsic resources and a dependence on social support results in the interdependence necessary to successfully transition into adulthood (Liebenberg, 2020). Thus, having a reliable network of peers may contribute to a person's interpersonal resilience as they transition to living independently.

Purpose of Report

In order to better understand how friendships facilitate post-care outcomes and the ways that care-experienced young people can be best supported to form a solid social network that includes peer connections, we must first clarify what literature exists on the topic, and areas for improvement of the evidence base. Therefore, the next portion of this paper will comprise of a scoping review of the literature on the impact of friendship for young people transitioning out of care. Following this, suggestions for practice and future research will be discussed.

Scoping Review of the Literature

Aims

In order to gain a thorough understanding on the makeup of the evidence base on friendship and outcomes for young people transitioning out of care, a systematic scoping review of the literature was conducted. The aims of this review were to assess the existing literature, including what types of studies have been done in this area and with which subpopulations of care-experienced young people, synthesise what known outcomes for care-experienced young people are facilitated by the presence of peer relationships, and identify any gaps in the literature to guide further research.

Method

This systematic review was conducted in line with the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) guidelines (Page et al., 2021).

Eligibility Criteria

Papers included in this review had to be original research or empirical studies, peer-reviewed, and written in English. Theoretical papers that did not produce original outcome data were not included. Both quantitative and qualitative studies were considered. Studies further needed to include outcome data that was framed as being linked to friendships or peer relationships. Studies that only described the social networks of young people rather than assessing their impact, or studies that focused on relationships with adults, carers, or professionals, were excluded. Finally, included papers needed to focus on young people transitioning out of care, or young adults who had experience of care. This excluded studies on children or teenagers still in care. This criteria was to ensure a focus on how friendship may be responsible for stronger post-care outcomes.

Search Strategy

The following databases were chosen due to their use in similar reviews, and the scope of the literature included in each. Scopus and Proquest (social sciences) include research within the social sciences, social work, and social policy, and PsychInfo was included to cover research relating to adolescent development and the psychological outcomes associated with social networks.

The search terms used included variations of the following: care experience or experience of care, foster, local authority care, care leaver, looked after, or out-of-home care; transitioning, ageing out, leaving care, emancipation, young adulthood, adult, youth, adolescent, teen, or independent; social support, social network, support network, friend or friendship, relationship, peer support, trusted connection, or community. These terms were chosen as similar search terms have been used in previous reviews relating to care-experienced young people and/or their social networks (Evans et al., 2021; Hiles et al., 2013).

The search was further refined using limiters available on each database. These were adjusted to show only peer-reviewed articles in English, and the date of publication was limited to only show articles written up to fifteen years before the search date (August 2024). This was to ensure only the most up-to-date and relevant literature was included in this review.

All results were imported into Rayyan for management. Duplicates were removed, and titles, abstracts, and then full-texts were assessed against the eligibility criteria.
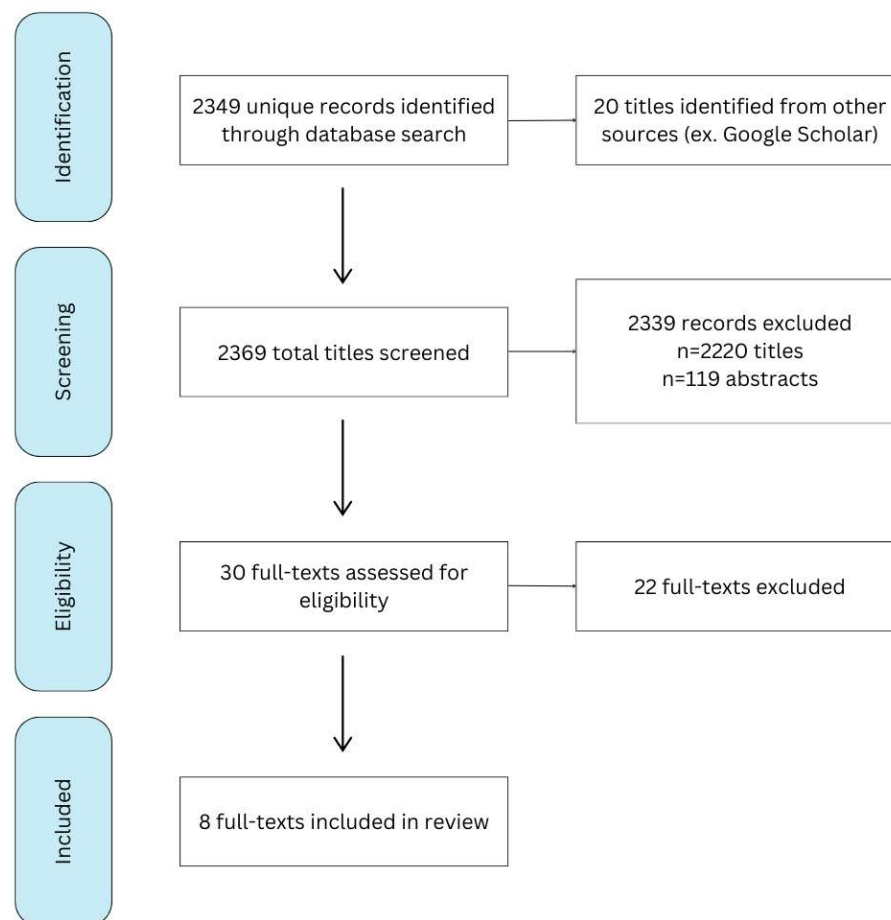
Data Extraction

A data extraction table was made prior to reading any eligible full-texts. This table included the following information from each study: author, year, place, study type, sample, change mechanism, measures, and outcome(s). Change mechanism refers to what the researchers posited created the assessed outcomes, whether that be a particular support

programme, overall social capital, network size, or quality of friendships, for example. Only outcomes that related to friendship or peer support were extracted. For each full text screened, the author kept additional notes to provide further context and record any relevant qualitative excerpts where participants spoke about the impact of friendships or peer support.

Findings

The initial search resulted in 2369 titles, following removal of duplicates. After review of titles, abstracts, and full-texts in accordance with the eligibility criteria, eight studies were selected for inclusion in this review (see Figure 1 for the PRISMA flow diagram).

Figure 1. *Prisma flow diagram of study selection*

Included studies came from the United States (n=3), Europe (n=2), United Kingdom (n=1), South Africa (n=1), and Israel (n=1). Ages of participants in the studies ranged from 16 to 32. One study (Cheatham et al., 2021) did not use care-experienced young people as their participants, but rather the professionals and stakeholders involved in a campus support programme for care-experienced students. Therefore, ages of students were not reported, but it can be assumed that as the programme was supporting university students, that the ages of supported young adults fell within a similar range to the rest of the studies.

Of the studies included in the review, all except one (Dinisman & Zeira, 2011) used a qualitative design. These studies mostly utilised unstructured or semi-structured interviews to allow participants to speak about their life history and provide context to their experiences of social support or friendship. Three studies conducted follow-up interviews with participants, at either three and nine months (Skobba, Meyers, & Tiller, 2018) or a year (Gundersen, 2020; Hollingworth, 2012).

Five studies focused on care-experienced young adults who were either in training, employment, or education (Cheatham et al., 2021; Gairal-Casado et al., 2022; Gundersen, 2020; Skobba, Meyers, & Tiller, 2018), or had at least one post-school qualification (Hollingworth, 2012). The remainder of the studies did not focus on one subset of care-experienced young people or have additional qualifiers for participants. Only one study (Gairal-Casado et al., 2022) focused solely on friendships as mechanism of change, while the rest discussed friendship among other social support variables. The characteristics and main findings of each study are shown in **Table 1.**

Only one study used quantitative methods to assess the effect of peer support on young people's perceived readiness to leave care (Dinisman & Zeira, 2011). Participants were given questionnaires both to assess their availability of social support, and how prepared they felt to enter adulthood and live independently. This study compared the impact of: individual characteristics (namely gender, nationality, placement history, self-esteem, and educational and employment experience); institutional characteristics (what type of care setting young people were in), including whether they participated in independent living programmes; dimensions of social support, categorised by peers, residential staff, birth parents, and close relatives. Only peer support and staff support were correlated with the outcome of readiness to leave care, and this correlation was strongest for peer support. Compared with all other individual, institutional, and social support characteristics, peer support was found to be most indicative of one's perceived readiness to enter adulthood. This study was the only to quantitatively measure outcomes and also had the largest sample size – 272 participants versus a range of 15-40 for the remainder of studies.

Social Capital

Two included studies focused specifically on social capital, and how young people leaving care mobilise and build their social capital to meet their needs (Reuben, 2024: Skobba, Meyers, & Tiller, 2018). In both of these qualitative studies, participants discussed friends and peers as main contributors to their social capital, and valuable members of their network who provided a variety of supports. Participants in both studies described friends who gave necessary emotional support as well as material support, such as a place to stay.

> "My friend has been helping me with everything. I shared my story with her. I live with her and shelter and everything ... She goes to school, so her parents got a place for her, a one-room that she lives in, and I used to live there. - Thumi" (Reuben, 2024, p. 4).

In the study by Reuben (2024) in particular, participants spoke about how they actively tried to build their social networks in order to achieve their goals, and that this ultimately made the difference for their post-care outcomes. Many spoke about how their experiences in care

Table 1. *Characteristics and findings of studies included in review*

Author, Year, Place	Sample	Study Type	Change Mechanism	Measures	Outcome(s)
Cheatham et al., 2021 USA	Stakeholders (board members, mentors, and staff) within a campus-based support programme for students with experience of care, or experiencing homelessness Programme serves about 40 students	Qualitative	Structured social support programme, including formal support from adults and opportunities for students to connect with each other	Focus group with stakeholders to ask about the programme's strengths, challenges, and goals to improve the service.	Programme fostered natural social supports for students and facilitated connections between students. This encouraged participation in study groups, activities, and community service. Limitations included concerns around "othering" students who were involved in programme.
Dinisman & Zeira, 2011 Israel	272 adolescents (average age being 19) about to age out of institutional care	Quantitative	Individual characteristics, social support, institutional factors	Readiness to leave care questionnaire Peer support assessed with items asking about perceived availability of this support.	Only peer support and staff support were significantly correlated with readiness to leave care. This was highest and most significant for peer support. Institutional factors did not correlate with outcome.
Gairal-Casado et al., 2022 Spain	15 care-experienced young people aged 18-28 who had successfully reached university	Qualitative	High-quality friendships	Influence of friendship on personal and academic trajectory Communicative daily life stories: dialogue between researcher and participant to come to mutual understanding of life experiences	Friendships provided motivation and support in academic environment and created feelings of social inclusion. One participant noted that having a solid network of friends helped her detect inappropriate situations in other relationships.
Gundersen, 2020 Norway	24 care-experienced adults, aged 16-32, in training, education, or employment	Qualitative, longitudinal	Social relations, including friendships	2 interviews 1 year apart, including Life Chart with information about family, living situation, education, and free time Aimed to understand participants' agency, and why some care-leavers "do well"	Presented relevant themes through emblematic case studies. These showed that friendships facilitated the following: Academic motivation, finding meaning in experiences, seeing self as person with agency rather than as a victim

Table 1 *cont*. *Characteristics and findings of studies included in review*

Author, Year, Place	Sample	Study Type	Change Mechanism	Measures	Outcome(s)
Hollingworth, 2012

England | 32 care-leavers between 18-24 who showed "educational promise" (defined as having at least one post-school qualification).

27 participated in one year follow-up interview | Qualitative, longitudinal | Social, leisure, and informal learning activities | Measured for outcomes relating to educational participation

Interviews covered topics such as family life, care history, education, employment, health, friendships, supportive adults, leisure activities, and hopes for the future. | 13 of 32 young people had engaged in sports, which allowed them to socialise with those without experience of care, and was found to be a source of stability.

10 of 32 identified "socialising with friends" as important part of leisure time, and said this helped them feel less isolated. |
| Reuben, 2024

South Africa | 31 care-leavers aged 17-26 | Qualitative | Mobilising social network to meet needs after leaving care | One-to-one interviews to ask participants about how they draw on their social environment to support their journey out of care | Several young people credited friends for helping them meet their physical, social, and emotional needs post-care. For some this included avoiding homelessness or being connected with employment.

"Weaker" connections with peers were often mobilised to meet immediate, instrumental needs, and over time turned into more reliable connections and sources of emotional support. |
| Skobba, Meyers, & Tiller, 2018

USA | 33 college students aged 18-29 with a history of foster care placement or homelessness | Qualitative, longitudinal | Leveraging social capital | Semi-structured interviews covering the life-course and participants' strategies for meeting their needs.

Two follow-up interviews at three and nine months, which also covered student engagement and social support | Students discussed importance of friends in receiving emotional and material support.

Students were able to create opportunities for themselves as well as share opportunities with other students. Some saw connections they had with peers as mentoring relationships. |
| Soffer-Elnekave et al., 2023

USA | 28 emerging adults (18-26 years) with child welfare involvement | Mixed methods | Psychosocial contexts that help young adults re-orient meaning of morally injurious events | Life story interview

Moral Injury Events Scale (MIES) | 18 (64%) of participants described supportive relationships with contemporaries (i.e. friends, partners, siblings) as enabling them to build trust and facilitate forgiveness, compassion, and overall meaning making of their experiences.

36% found meaning through prosocial engagement with peers. |

prepared them to be able to form connections with a wealth of people in the community as young adults. It should be noted that this study took place focused on young adults leaving a specific care organisation in South Africa in which a social skills programme is integrated into their approach, which likely is why the young people interviewed felt fairly competent in their ability to create and mobilise social connections. For example, one participant spoke about after leaving care, he was able to further hone the social skills he learned while looked after, learning to observe people, slowly integrate into their social circle, and then identify the right time to ask for help.

In contrast, some care-experienced university students in the Skobba, Meyers, and Tiller (2018) study did not feel able to form relationships with their peers.

"Well, I don't have any friends – period. I don't have any friends at all. I don't know anybody at all which is part of the reason why I'm, I wouldn't say depressed, but kind of … I don't know…. I don't know what to call it… lonely. I really hate it - especially at night. I'm like what the heck am I going to do? - Alyssa." (p. 204)

However, of the few that did have close friendships in university, these relationships were invaluable. Two young people described a friend as their strongest source of support, providing encouragement, emotional support, and tangible supports such as rides to class or food. Others felt that their peers in university were instrumental in creating opportunities for them academically, and that they later felt able to do the same for other care-experienced students.

Effects on Education

Two studies only focused on college or university students with care-experience (Cheatham et al., 2021; Skobba, Meyers, & Tiller, 2018), and three had eligibility criteria that required that participants were either in currently employment or education (Gundersen, 2020), had reached university (Gairal-Casado, 2022), or had at least one post-school qualification (Hollingworth, 2012). For the former of the three studies, the reasoning for this criterion was to focus on care-experienced young people who had "succeeded" after leaving care, and aimed to investigate why, from the participants' perspectives, why this may have been. Gundersen (2020) noted that in their context of Norway, higher education is necessary to get employment, and therefore reasonably assumed that to their participants, reaching college or university would be an indicator that they are "doing well."

Qualitative feedback from participants in the studies by Gairal-Casado et al. (2022), Gundersen (2020), and Skobba, Meyers, and Tiller (2018) showed that for many care-experienced young people, friends were crucial motivators in continuing to higher education. For some, being surrounded by people who were working towards college or university encouraged them to do the same.

"My friends are fixated on education. They all want to make it [in life] and value it highly, which has been very stabilising for me. – Anna" (Gundersen, 2020, p. 685)

Gairal-Casado et al. (2022) further identified that many participants did not even consider an alternative to attending university. One young person in the study noted, "Almost everyone went to university, so I just thought it was normal. – Gerard" (p. 1839). In the study by Skobba, Meyers, and Tiller (2018), participants focused more on how emotional support and an increased sense of belonging because of their friendship helped them persist throughout university.

> "I don't know where I would be without my best friend and my roommate … sometimes I just wanted to give up and go home because I didn't fit in. -Gregory" (p. 203).

Hollingworth (2012) focused on the impact of social, leisure, and informal learning activities on educational participation. The researcher identified what activities the participants had been involved in during school and asked them to describe how these contributed towards their success in early adulthood. Of the 32 young people involved, 13 were engaged in sport, and these young people reported that sports helped them to develop their social network by socialising with young people who were not in the care system, which they found to be an important source of stability and consistency. 12 took part in volunteering and connected with peers this way. One young person mentioned volunteering as a peer mentor for another young person in care who was close to her age. She stated that this helped her develop a positive sense of self and further reflect on her own experiences in care. Only 10 of the 32 participants identified "socialising with friends" as a significant part of their leisure time, but for those who did, they described how spending time with friends was important for feeling less isolated and for integrating their experiences. Hollingworth further noted how one's social networks may provide opportunities for informal learning that can make a notable difference when navigating life after care.

One study evaluated a structured social support programme (Cheatham et al., 2021). This programme was a university campus support programme that incorporated both formal support from staff and the provision of opportunities for care-experienced students to socialise and connect with each other, including study groups, community service, and other activities. Involved students further received academic and emotional support, and assistance securing resources and funding from programme staff. The researchers did not collect feedback from students themselves, but rather from members of the advisory board, university community, mentors, and programme staff to determine, from their perspective, what the benefits and challenges were through the implementation of the campus support programme. Regarding peer relationships, the one outcome that stakeholders discussed was that the programme allowed for naturally forming relationships between care-experienced students, which further encouraged students to attend social activities and deepen these connections. However, participants in the study also identified that this may have created a felt separation between the care-experienced students and the wider university community, suggesting that helping care-experienced students to integrate into campus social life and form friendships with both care-experienced and non-care-experienced students should be a focus in order to increase their sense of belonging.

Effects on Psychological Wellbeing

A portion of included studies included outcomes of how friendship had a positive impact on different psychological factors for young people transitioning out of care. Often, this involved general emotional support throughout the young person's journey into adulthood (Gundersen, 2020; Reuben, 2024; Skobba, Meyers, and Tiller, 2018; Soffer-Elnekave et al., 2024). One study (Soffer-Elnekave et al., 2024) looked at what psychosocial factors facilitate meaning making after moral injury, or the psychological and social harm caused by traumatic events. A majority of participants (64%) reported that relationships with "contemporaries", for instance partners or friends, helped them to build resilience and trust, find meaning within a negative experience, and facilitate forgiveness and compassion. This theme is echoed by Gundersen (2020), in which one conclusion was that through peer relationships, participants were able to "sort out" their experiences and make them meaningful, shifting from seeing themselves as "victims" to people with agency who are capable of making changes through their actions. This was found to be psychologically beneficial, develop a stronger sense of self, and help the participants in the study achieve more as young adults.

Discussion

This review summarises what empirical evidence exists on the impacts of friendships and peer relationships for young people leaving care. More importantly, this review emphasises the dearth of formal research on this topic, highlighting an imminent need for more studies on how friendships facilitate stronger outcomes for those moving on from care. During the screening process, one of the main reasons that studies were excluded was because they focused only on relationships that care-experienced young people had with adults, whether this be professionals, foster carers, or adult natural mentors in the community. The one quantitative study by Dinisman and Zeira (2011) showed promising results, however, for the importance of having stable peer relationships, finding that peer support was more likely to indicate perceived readiness to leave care than any other factor, including professional support and institutional factors. This warrants further investigation into how we might measure the connection between peer networks, preparedness to live independently, and positive outcomes in emerging adulthood.

The outcomes that have been reported in the included studies, however, indicate that care-experienced people across backgrounds and cultures perceive similar benefits to having stable friendships, and that they value these relationships highly as facilitators of their success as emerging adults. Generally, emotional support, encouragement, social inclusion, and instrumental support were most discussed by participants across studies as coming from peers in their social network.

Themes around identity formation and a stronger sense of self also emerged from a few studies in this review. In educational contexts, when the peers and close friends around the participants were working towards higher education, and the participant felt included in this social circle, they themselves felt that they were someone who was capable of, and expected to, succeed further by pursuing college or university (Gairal-Casado, 2022; Gundersen, 2020). Williams et al. (2020) investigated the causes for the educational attainment gap between English care-experienced adolescents and their peers. They found that at age 13-14, about 45%

of care-experienced young people think that they are likely to apply to university, compared to about 66% of their peers. By the age of 16-17, this drops to 31% and 55%, respectively, showing that not only do care-experienced young people become less expectant that they will apply to university, but the gap in expectations between them and their peers widens. Based on the findings within the studies of this review, it seems likely that by supporting care-experienced young people in adolescence to build their peer networks and become integrated in the circles of peers both with and without experience of care, they will be more likely to hold similar expectations of themselves as their peers. As previously mentioned, adolescence is a time in which identity formation is extremely important, and adolescents develop their sense of self in the context of their social environment (Erikson, 1963). The findings of this review echo this, as some of the participants who reflected on having and being motivated by an integrated social network in school, thus solidifying their identity as being someone who will pursue higher education, went on to further study.

For other participants, socialising with friends helped young people with experience of care to view themselves differently. This was facilitated in a variety of ways, including making meaning of experiences by opening up about them with others or through prosocial activities with peers with and without experience of care (Gundersen, 2020; Soffer-Elnekave et al., 2023). Connecting with peers and friends helped participants see the value in themselves and their unique experiences, further helping them to develop agency and feel like active participants in their lives rather than inhibited by their upbringing or the care system.

Limitations of Review

This review has some limitations that must be considered when interpreting the findings. For one, as this was a rapid scoping review with limitations on extensiveness of the search, it is possible that not all the relevant research was identified for this review. This rapid review was undertaken by one reviewer, and therefore screening decisions could not be confirmed by another reviewer. Not all potential sources were searched, including additional databases housing peer-reviewed research articles and grey literature. In the social care sector, often charities and organisations that work with care-experience young people do research with this population and produce reports that would not be identified through a traditional database search, and therefore such evidence is potentially missing from this review.

Other limitations emerged from within the included studies. The main barrier to forming strong conclusions based on the existing evidence base is that the research is predominantly qualitative. While this allows for a rich understanding of personal experiences of how peer relationships may have made profound differences in individuals' lives, this makes it difficult to know, precisely, how friendships and the strength of these relationships affect post-care outcomes. Further, only one study (Gairal-Casado et al., 2022) focused specifically on friendship, while the remainder of qualitative studies instead included peer relationships as part of a wider examination of social support. Thus, it is not clear exactly how many participants in each study were positively impacted by friendship, as we can only draw outcomes from selected stories and quotations that were included in each report. Friendship seemed to only be discussed by a portion of participants in each study, meaning that the proportion of participants who experienced the benefits of friendship after leaving care were likely smaller than the

sample sizes. It is unclear whether this was because participants did not find friendship to be important, or because they lacked peer relationships at all.

Finally, no studies focused on young people with care-experience and additional adversity, such as those in the justice system, young people struggling with addiction, or young care-experienced parents. As many studies included only focused on the most high-achieving care-experienced young people who had gone onto employment or education, this excludes a large proportion of the care-leaving community. In England, about 40% of care-experienced young adults aged 19-21 are not in employment, education, or training (Harrison et al., 2023). However, friendships may still help this group of care leavers succeed in other areas of life, and therefore other groups of care-experienced emerging adults should be prioritised in future research.

Implications and Recommendations

The present review indicates a pressing need to direct further inquiry into how friendships facilitate positive outcomes for young people transitioning out of the care system. We know that young people in care highly value their friendships because they tell us, but it appears that professionals often see peer relationships as low priority, compared with young people's relationships with professionals, families, and formal or natural adult mentors. However, if we build the evidence base on why young people in care need to be supported and encouraged to form peer networks, this may influence a change in practice and motivate professionals to pay more attention to this largely unmet need in the care-experienced community.

Importance of Friendships

A qualitative study by Irvine and Emond (2023) explored how children in care in Scotland experienced peer support. The young people in the study told researchers that friendships were "transformative," and that they viewed friends as more reliable relationships capable of offering unconditional support, compared to family members or professionals. More importantly, while not all of the relationships that young people had were reported as being positive, all the young people involved valued these opportunities to form naturally occurring relationships, nonetheless. This may be because conflicts with peers have the potential to help adolescents build resilience, better understand what they want out of their relationships, and give them opportunities for self-evaluation (Laursen & Collins, 1994; Laursen & Pursell, 2009). Friendship has also been found in longitudinal studies of maltreated children or children growing up in difficult home environments to mitigate negative impacts on self-esteem and prevent peer victimisation (Bukowski, Motzoi, and Meyer, 2006). Finally, childhood friendships are linked with lower rates of loneliness and depression, and predictive of a higher level of self-worth and stronger coping skills later in life (Holder and Coleman, 2015).

Participants in the Irvine and Emond (2023) study reported that they felt that professionals did not understand their friendships and downplayed the importance of their peer networks. However, investing in young people's friendships benefits the care system, as well. Paulsen & Berg (2016) noted that "due to limited support from the informal network, many need

continued support from [child welfare services]." As the findings in the present review indicate, friendships provide important attachment relationships that those leaving care can rely on to help meet their needs, and thus reduces their reliance on professionals and formal services. Supporting young people to build their peer support networks prior to leaving care therefore may be an effective way to ensure they are prepared for independence.

Examples of Good Practice

First and foremost, it is important for professionals working with young people in care to take an interest in their friendships and recognise how these add value, and ideally this should start before the young person leaves care so that they do not enter adulthood without a social network. One useful approach to doing this is through collaborating with the young person to complete a social network analysis. Blakeslee & Best (2019) developed a support network mapping tool specifically to measure support networks of foster youth. With this, young people wrote names of people who played a role in their lives in the last year, across the domains of family, friends, school or work, and community, indicating strong, neutral, and weak ties. They also indicated what kind of support each person offered them. This approach was found to be useful, helping young people's networks to be better understood by themselves and those they are working with, and can help to identify areas of the network needing enhancement. From this, young people may be further supported to build new connections, increase diversity of their network, discuss relationship-building skills, and offer a medium for young people to examine what emotional, informational, and practical needs are and are not being met by their current network.

The care sector should also be looking at how young people in care can be supported to build social skills and learn how to form healthy relationships with peers while in care. As seen in the study by Reuben (2024), young adults leaving care from Girls and Boys Town, a residential care organisation in South Africa, felt confident in forming social connections and mobilising these to get the support they needed while living independently. This, in part, may be due to a social skills programme that is offered to all young people in care with this organisation. The social skills programme includes 183 different social skills to help young people with social learning. These are customised to the needs of the young person, and include strategies to respond to different life situations and challenges, such as anger, aggression, decision making, peer pressure, family relationship problems, and coping behaviours, with the goal to help young people function adaptively in social interactions (Mmusi & van Breda, 2017). However, it should be noted that while an evaluation of this approach did find evidence that care-leavers continued to apply these skills as adults, one barrier to greater success of this programme was that the skills young people learned in the programme were sometimes too rigid and therefore did not apply to life outside of residential care. Therefore, the researchers suggested that for a social skills programme to be truly effective, young people in care also need opportunities to apply the skills they learned in a real-life context.

For young people in care to learn and internalise certain social skills such as dealing with peer pressure and navigating relationship problems, they need to first be able to form natural relationships with their peers, and often these will be imperfect relationships. Understandably, this creates anxiety for professionals whose priority is to safeguard the child. Professionals may worry about young people spending time with friends who could be "bad

influences." However, there is evidence that friendship has strong safeguarding potential for young people in care. Safer London produced a report on peer relationships and safeguarding, and their findings echoed many of the themes in this review. For example, young people supported each other with practical needs such as securing food or shelter, and emotional needs such as reassurance, someone to share experiences with, and someone to listen. The report also identified additional peer support themes, including examples of friends removing each other from dangerous situations and offering protection in difficult situations, accompanying each other to social events or appointments, and providing opportunities to learn new skills and build confidence (Lattimer, Elias, & Firmin, 2020). Further, it is important to understand that for young people in care, feeling safe is about much more than only being protected from harm (Roesch-Marsh et al., 2023). Friendships, particularly those with other care-experienced young people, offer a sense of belonging and feeling understood, safe, and loved.

After transitioning out of care, it is important to provide opportunities for care-experienced young people to connect with each other and with their communities, to ensure that they have a network of friendships and peer connections to support them in the transition to adulthood. For students this might involve a campus-based programme for care-experienced students to meet and socialise, or near-peer mentor schemes. One promising initiative has started in Scotland – a partnership between East Lothian Council and Hub for Success, which pairs care-experienced university students with a "peer flatmate" to ensure students get the support they need with living skills and their education, as well as helping to facilitate natural peer relationships. Holistic programmes such as this that aim to meet both practical needs, such as a safe and stable home, and social needs, like opportunities to socialise and make friends, may play an important role in improving outcomes for young people leaving care.

Future Directions

Ensuring young people in and leaving care are able to build adequate support networks is a complex issue. Care-experienced young people experience barriers on personal, family, community, and systemic levels that may make it more difficult for them to form friendships. Repeated loss, lack of trust, insecure attachment, and emotional difficulties can make it difficult for young people with child maltreatment histories to get close to others, especially if moved to a new community and needing to constantly form new relationships in unfamiliar contexts (Hodgdon & Landers, 2021; Purtell et al., 2022; Tzouvara et al., 2023). With that said, young people in and leaving care can have meaningful relationships with friends that will support their development throughout adolescence and early adulthood, but only if the adults in their lives value their friendships as much as they do, and work to set young people up for success in the social environment. The findings from this review show that we must find solutions to prevent young people leaving care without social networks if we want to improve the care system and the outcomes for the young people it serves. These solutions will be varied and need to be tailored to each young person – from mental health treatment and social skills training to involvement in extracurricular activities and structured social support programmes – but shifting our perspective to keep the importance of friendship at the forefront of practice is the first step to necessary change.

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