

What helps young people succeed after care? Exploring the role of positive leisure activities

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Young people's outcomes during the transition out of care and following is a key priority for practitioners, services, policy makers, and young people themselves. In our previous article on [outcomes and metrics](#), we noted how outcome measurements for care-experienced young people (CEYP) typically centre around their participation in employment, education, or training, maintaining (supported or independent) accommodation, engaging with services and supports, and avoiding conflict with the law. Having good physical and mental health are also commonly measured outcomes, although the current means of doing this at scale are limited and often lack necessary nuance. In reality, a successful transition from care and into adulthood is complex and may look different for each person. In this article, we are going to look at what CEYP define as success, and what we can do to help them get there.

What constitutes successful youth development?

This question can not be comprehensively answered in this article alone, or even several articles, or even several books. However, [recent research from the Rees Centre at the University of Oxford](#) paints a compelling picture of what success post-care looks like to CEYP. The researchers worked with CEYP to unpack existing outcome measures and “to challenge the assumptions built into existing practice and data systems and develop an alternative framework grounded in lived experience” (p.6). Perhaps unsurprisingly, some of the metrics highlighted in our previous article held little weight to CEYP themselves, and while some of the success markers CEYP highlighted were related, they were also more nuanced and contextual. For instance, being able to tick “in education” was not sufficient for young people. Rather, success to them looked like learning, growing, and fulfilling personal interests and goals, even if through non-traditional routes. If education was a goal, then CEYP reflected success would mean studying in a supportive environment, studying something that has relevance to their lives, and being able to study without practical, psychological, or social barriers. All fifteen markers of success identified by CEYP in the study are shown in the figure below. The essence of all of these outcomes is that they are not actually outcomes at all. CEYP in this research consistently affirmed that success is not a destination but rather an ongoing process of *becoming* – becoming the person they want to be and living in alignment with their interests and values. CEYP discussed having their physical needs met, of course, through finances and suitable housing. But they also stressed the importance of having a community, a stable base from which to explore their identity and grow, the space to process and heal from past experiences, and having access to opportunities that facilitate all of the above.

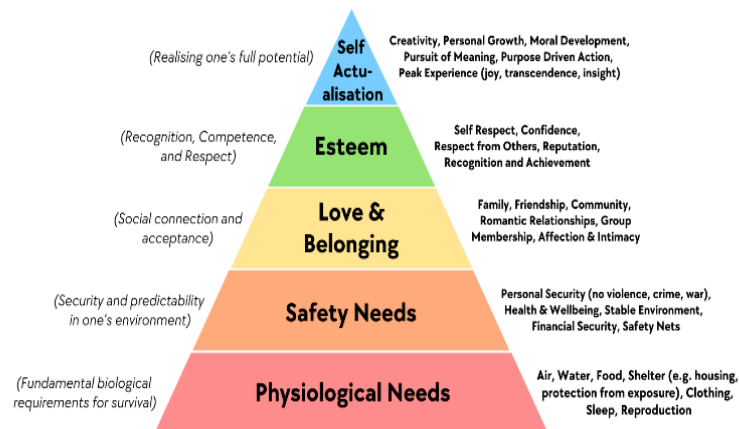
What Defines Success, According to Care Leavers

A journey, not a destination Success as a continuously evolving concept and not needing to always strive towards the next achievement.	Breaking the cycle Breaking intergenerational cycles and challenging low expectations of care leavers, while having their achievements recognised in context of adversity.	Community & interdependence Success as having meaningful, consistent, and supportive relationships, rather than marked by complete independence.	Everyday functioning & independent living Being able to "get through the day" and manage one's personal needs, such as staying mentally well, staying fed, and running a home.	A place to call home Not simply being housed, but having suitable and age-appropriate housing. Having a place where they feel safe, stable, and autonomous.
Financial security Meeting basic needs financially while feeling in control of their lives. Enjoying "small luxuries" like being able to buy one's own things or pay for holidays.	Employment Having work that fulfils needs for enjoyment, autonomy, and meaning, and that fits in with their life circumstances.	Education Happiness and contentment as more important than qualifications or milestones. Relevance, accessibility, and emotional readiness as priorities in education.	Recovery, growth, and expression Engaging in hobbies and activities than support self-expression, joy, and mental health. Being able to participate in hobbies, build skills, and meet others without barriers.	Surviving, processing, and healing Rather than being "symptom-free," success in this area is building resilience and self-acceptance, and having opportunities to process experiences.
Identity & authenticity Being oneself, undefined by others' expectations. Building an identity separate from the stigma of being care-experienced, vulnerable, or traumatised.	Stability Contrasting an unstable upbringing and adverse early experiences with consistency and security. This can be financially, physically, socially, or mentally.	Health, leisure, and daily life Having the resources to maintain physical health and engage in hobbies and leisure activities, including after leaving care and having less structured support.	Citizenship & contribution Being free to pursue own interests and be activists/advocates on their own terms, rather than "giving back" being an expectation to be successful as a care leaver.	In parenthood & seeking asylum These identities reshaped how individuals saw their own success. Success as being able to navigate additional barriers and find belonging and support.

Reflecting findings from *Success - Whose Definition Counts?* Rees Centre

The indicators that CEYP name as those of successful development are truthfully more aligned with developmental theory than those services and systems often use. From Erik Erikson and Jean Piaget to Lev Vygotsky and Abraham Maslow, prominent psychological and social theorists tell us that development, success, and happiness come from learning about oneself and the world, growing into an individual with a sense of confidence and competence, connecting with others, and feeling a sense of purpose and belonging. In Erikson's theory of psychosocial development, he described essential developmental "tasks" that individuals need to resolve over the course of their lifetime. According to Erikson, prior to entering adulthood young people should be able to act autonomously, be able to act in a goal-directed manner, and develop competence and mastery. They should also emerge with a (relatively) stable sense of self, feeling secure in their likes, goals, values, and role in their social environment. Meanwhile, Piaget tells us that young people should have opportunities to develop their capacity for reasoning, planning, and thinking about abstract concepts. Vygotsky introduced the concept of a "zone of proximal development" of the space between what a person can do on their own and what is fully out of their reach. In many ways, staying in that zone of proximal development *is* the outcome, because that is where learning and growth happen. In this zone, young people (but really all of us) are achieving that success milestone of *becoming*. We'll return to this concept when considering what we can do to help young people succeed.

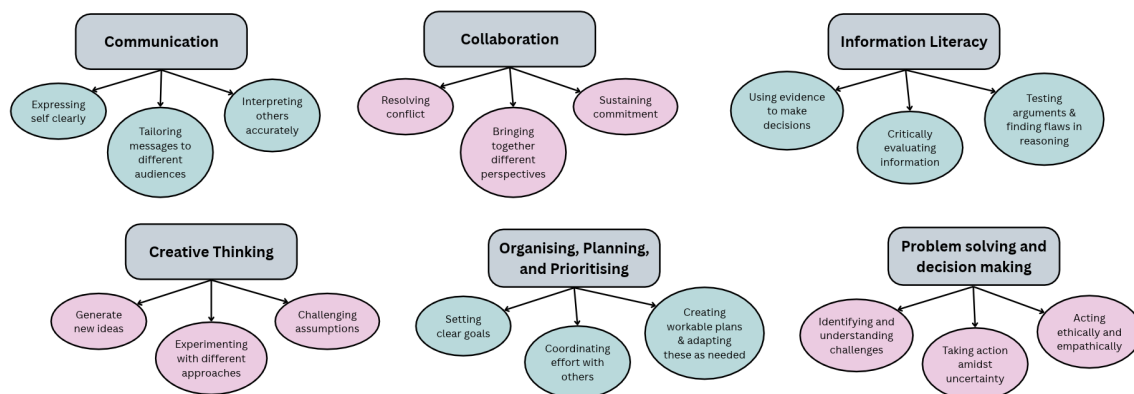
And finally, I'd like to highlight a well-known psychological concept, Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs. This was first introduced in 1943 and remains a useful resource for understanding what individuals need to feel fulfilled. While its function as a strict hierarchy is less supported, the needs on the pyramid are nonetheless recognisable as ones relevant to us all. If we look at the needs below, we can see many of these reflected in what CEYP highlighted in the Rees Centre research. Many of these are not only external outcomes, but rather a feeling. Feeling safe, feeling connected, feeling self-assured, feeling joy, and finding meaning.



Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs ([Wikipedia](#))

And if we *do* want to consider success as having a career, even a good career, then these aforementioned milestones still have a place. There's the obvious – it's more feasible to gain and maintain employment when one's physical needs of food, shelter, and health are maintained, as well as when one's mental health is stable. Even then, it's getting more difficult by the day for young people to find employment, let alone those who are already at a disadvantage due to the circumstances of being care-experienced. Part of this difficulty, besides there being less jobs, is a mismatch between the skills young people possess and the skills that employers are seeking. A 2025 report from the National Foundation for Education Research (NFER), "[The Skills Imperative 2035](#)," reflects an in-depth analysis of what skills will be most needed within the workforce by 2035. This research was stated to be in direct response to this widening skills discrepancy, but also to policymakers' perspective that the education system is not sufficiently preparing young people for the real demands of work. The report further highlights the "rising number of young people classified as NEET (Not in Education, Employment, or Training), **now nearly one million, disproportionately from backgrounds with various forms of disadvantage**" (p.3). The employment landscape is changing far more rapidly than previously expected, largely due to AI and the disappearance of "low- or un-skilled" occupations. This means that employers are, and will continue to be, increasingly looking for what were commonly referred to as "soft skills" as available positions become more complex and professionalised. The necessary skills that the researchers predicted will be most important by the year 2035 are shown in the diagram below.

Essential Employment Skills (EES) and Sub-skills



Adapted from *The Skills Imperative 2035*, Nuffield Foundation

These skills and sub-skills are transferrable to a high number of positions and will equip young people to navigate a quickly changing employment landscape. Like the success indicators identified by CEYP, many of these skills are not a destination or something to that can be acquired through time-limited job skills training. These are skills gained through exploration and through experience in the social world, and are continuously developed over time rather than mastered through traditional approaches to learning. The skills that will be required by employers now and will be even more necessary in the near future mirror the success in *becoming*. Rather than requiring a tangible skill, like how to write code or to operate a machine or whatever it may be, employers will be increasingly looking at the whole person and their intrinsic qualities. Fostering such qualities is less straightforward than just creating a set curriculum.

“Although there is a growing consensus among employers and educators about which skills are essential for employment, **these skills are not foregrounded within the curriculum, accountability or assessment systems for most young people in the UK.** As a result, young people from different backgrounds have unequal opportunities to develop them, diminishing their chances in the labour market.” – [Nuffield Foundation](#)

What supports successful transitions

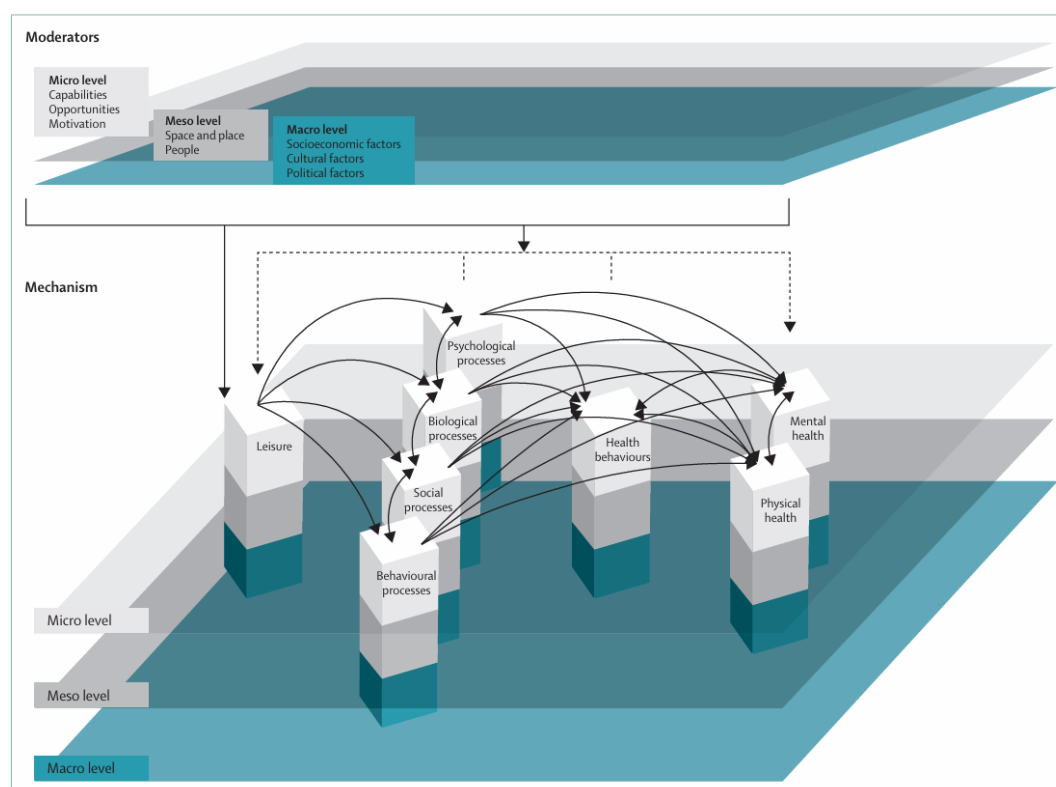
Returning to the concept of a zone of proximal development (ZPD) put forth by Vygotsky – play inherently creates a ZPD for children (Hakkarainen & Bredikyte, 2008). Play is commonly associated with young children and with what we think of as games. In reality, play is a much broader concept with a myriad of proposed definitions. Ultimately, what brings these theories together is that play is done for its own sake, for the purpose of fun and enjoying the process, and involves creativity and spontaneity (Gordon, 2014; Siegel, 2011). Play is essential for learning and development at all ages. It provides stress relief and improved mood, allows for the acquisition of new skills, develops new neural circuits, and may even help adolescents and adults “earn” secure attachment despite early life experiences (Gordon, 2014; Siegel, 2011).

In contexts other than childhood, we are more likely to refer to play as *leisure*. Leisure is then interchanged with other terms, such as hobby engagement, recreation, or extracurricular activities (usually for those of school age). Therefore any of these terms may be used in the remainder of this article, but their core purpose remains the same: they are activities done by individuals, for personal fulfilment and joy, are not done explicitly for work, and are presumably self-selected and voluntary.

Leisure activities have been shown to develop the very soft skills that the NFER identified as being essential for tomorrow’s workforce. A report from the [Social Mobility Commission](#) found that extracurricular activities in youth are associated with developing communication, social and interpersonal skills, confidence, teamwork, persistence, independence, ability to follow instructions, interact with authority figures and peers, and long-term goal setting. In this research, young people themselves reflected that participating in extracurricular activities improved their confidence interacting with others, could support job and university applications, and helped them gain new skills, while also serving as a space to destress and have fun. Of course, some of the EES shown above are more likely to be supported by certain activities rather than others, and therefore matching the activity to goals may be ideal. For example, enhancing information literacy might be better achieved through an activity like speech and debate, whereas creative thinking may be more inherent in arts activities. That said, leisure activities have the greatest developmental impact when they are maintained and iterative, and a young person is only going to give themselves fully to an activity (or at all) if they enjoy it. Fortunately, irrespective of the specific activity, leisure engagement on the whole functions as a complex intervention, and one that can facilitate a wide range of personal, social, and professional competencies for young people who are given access to them.

Above essential job skills, participation in leisure helps develop the whole person. Play has been referred to as a process of self-realisation, “a fundamental way creatures make coherent their possibilities for acting in the world” (Henricks, 2014, p. 190). This is supported by the complex evidence base regarding how leisure impacts our wellbeing. A systematic review by Fancourt et al. (2021) identified and mapped over 600 mechanisms that demonstrate how leisure activities affect our health and wellbeing. These include mechanisms that function at the micro level (affecting individuals or small numbers of people); the meso level (affecting groups, communities, or institutions); and the macro level (affecting whole societies or cultures). Essentially, leisure

activities activate internal psychological, biological, social, and behavioural processes across these levels, that then lead to wellbeing-supporting behaviours, and thus better outcomes. At the micro level, participation can activate psychological, social, and behavioural processes such as emotional learning, autonomy, resilience, identity development, social bonding, motivation, and achievement. At the meso level, leisure can influence wider groups and communities by strengthening group identity, cohesion, social learning, and resilience. Societally, the aforementioned processes can in turn contribute to broader changes in social attitudes, equality, cultural norms, and opportunities for participation. Together, this suggests that leisure activities can provide contexts for developing psychological, social, and behavioural capabilities while also shaping the wider social environments in which these capabilities develop.



The Multi-Level Leisure Mechanisms Framework (Fancourt et al., 2021)

In this sense, we can imagine how participation in leisure activities can support the aspects of success that CEYP themselves have identified, from feeling connected to their community and countering stigma, to healing from traumatic experiences and having the capacities to live independently. An environment in which *all* young people have equitable access to leisure activities is one in which they are more likely to craft an authentic identity, feel like they belong, and experience acceptance from others. Many activities, especially creative ones, will provide young people with opportunities for self-expression, to process experiences, and to find meaning. Simultaneously, these activities themselves will enhance their personal skills relevant to adult functioning, education, and employment.

The provision gap

Accessible opportunities for young people to engage in leisure and recreation have been cut significantly as it is, and those from disadvantaged backgrounds are more likely to suffer the consequences. The data on care-experienced young people's participation in leisure activities is scarce, but we do know that young people with characteristics that often overlap with care-experience - including young people from deprived areas, in low-income families, with additional support needs, and with lower levels of educational attainment - are less likely to participate in extracurricular activities. One study of 86 young people in care found that when participants did engage in leisure activities, they were more likely to be passive or independent activities (ex. watching TV, playing football alone) (Quarmby et al., 2019). Young people in care face additional practical and social barriers

to participating in what's called "structured leisure-time activities" - activities such as arts, music, sports, or hobbies that are typically facilitated and done in groups, and that require prolonged effort and attention. Such activities will also lead to more benefits overall than doing these activities alone.

Care-experienced young people face barriers to due placement instability and moves; reduced free time due to mandatory meetings with various professionals; leisure activities being formally facilitated by carers or the local authority (and thus being involuntary); lack of support from carers or resources to participate in activities; feeling uncomfortable participating in mainstream or school-based activities (Quarmby et al., 2019). A study from Coram of over 30,000 CEYP identified similar barriers: transport difficulties, financial constraints, placement instability, consent barriers, and poor communication around available opportunities. They noted that "CEYP who have experienced trauma may be more likely to discontinue activities if they do not feel comfortable in a setting." This might mean that carers are more hesitant to sign CEYP up into activities, considering many entail an upfront and non-refundable cost. When leisure activities are not freely accessible to all young people, it exacerbates the impact of these practical and psychological barriers, further keeping CEYP out of leisure and play. In the next article of this series, we will focus more on what may be done to mitigate these barriers for care-experienced young people to participate in enriching leisure activities.

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