

The development and implementation of The LAC Pack in West Lothian

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Introduction

Research has shown that children looked after by the local authority are behind their peers in terms of educational attainment. They are more likely to leave school early without qualifications, and are at risk of school exclusion (HM Inspectors of Schools and the Social Work Services Inspectorate, 2001). This paper will outline the development and implementation of a resource which is designed to address some of these issues.

The LAC Pack is a training package aimed at informing West Lothian schools, social workers and foster carers about the needs of children and young people in the care of the local authority. It also encourages participants to reflect on the impact of early negative care experiences on their attainment in education. The materials were developed by the senior educational psychologist for looked-after children, who collated the information through research and practice in an innovative joint post managed by West Lothian Council Departments for Education and for Social Policy. *The LAC Pack* supports the Scottish Government's vision for all children which was articulated in *Getting it right for every child* (Scottish Executive, 2005). This document clearly states that children from all walks of life should be supported to be effective learners. The Government has placed a strong emphasis on early intervention and the need to create more appropriate educational options to meet the needs of our most vulnerable and at-risk children through a systemic approach (Scottish Executive 2007).

The Learning with care report (HM Inspectors of Schools and the Social Work Services Inspectorate, 2001) demonstrated that looked-after children and young people in school sometimes present with poor attendance and challenging behaviour because of emotional, psychological and practical issues connected with being in care. *The LAC Pack* is designed to explore the impact of specific care issues on behaviour in school and gives pragmatic and focused strategies for managing behaviour. Staff training activities are also included. It aims to serve both as a source of focused information for LAC-designated school staff and other education and care professionals and also as a training resource to be cascaded to staff teams in school settings throughout the local authority area.

Background

The secondment of an educational psychologist for looked-after children took place in June 2003 within West Lothian Council to promote joint working between the Departments of Social Policy and Education and in response to government directives. The aim of the post was to provide a more holistic approach to meeting the needs of local children looked after by West Lothian Council, and to see what needed to be done to improve attainment for looked-after children. The needs of the young people, and the carers and other professionals working with them, were analysed. On the basis of this, consultancy and training were provided which was targeted at enabling key adults within the child's care and school environment to work with their young people appropriately and supportively. As well as training and consultancy, the LAC psychologist also saw individual young people referred by social workers. The case load included the most at-risk young people, some of whom are not succeeding either in their care or education setting.

Stage one: Development of the pack

When the LAC psychologist moved into post, training needs analysis became an important aspect of the work. This training needs analysis was a key feature of the post from June 2003 until June 2005, and ultimately led to the development of *The LAC Pack*. When the post was first established, the LAC psychologist prioritised and developed training in attachment, looking at the spectrum of behaviour which can result from a child's early negative experiences in his or her home background (Bowlby, 1969). The training was increasingly informed and refined by case work with young people and their carers. First-hand experience gained from the young people with their wealth of differences made the training both specific and pragmatic. It was offered in the first instance to foster carers and to residential staff and was found to be very useful in informing their work with young people.

Having established positive networks of relationships with carers and social workers, the LAC psychologist began to consult with schools and their allocated psychologists about specific young people who were on the verge of exclusion because of emotional and behavioural difficulties. As well as seeking advice and consultation regarding individual young people, attachment training was sometimes requested by head teachers for the whole school staff team, to enable them to understand the reasons for behaviour which was making it difficult for young people to stay in school and to reach their potential in terms of academic achievement. In dialogue, teachers expressed their need and willingness to understand more about the specific issues for children as a result of being in care, on an emotional and a practical level.

There was a need for school staff and carers to gain some real insight into what it is like for a child to have had the kind of experiences which result in being taken into care. When children are accommodated, they lose familiar routines and expectations and, sometimes, their belongings, family, friends and other significant adults who knew them well. Where they have several placement moves, they have a sense of being 're-invented', and feelings of change and loss sometimes have an impact on their behaviour. This is especially true in the school setting, where the 'safety net' of familiar routines and the challenge of curriculum work combine to make it one of the most likely setting for 'acting out'. Casework experience and evaluations of attachment training with schools, residential staff and foster carers in West Lothian indicated that when professionals understand children in care may feel, especially when children have difficulty in expressing this, then those adults are better placed to plan an informed, compassionate and rational response. Research would indicate that such responses help vulnerable children to develop resilience (Daniel, Gilligan and Wassell, 1999).

As an emergent project, the development of *The LAC Pack* was based on the need to provide answers to three very pertinent questions which were being asked of the LAC psychologist by school staff, carers and social workers with whom she consulted in daily practice in this specialist interagency post:

- Why do children in care do so badly in school compared with their peers?
- How can schools learn more about the experience and needs of children in care?
- How can care and education work together to provide an holistic framework of support for the child?

To enable looked-after children to access and sustain school attendance and to make educational progress, materials were developed which would provide information to teachers, support staff and other professionals about the specific experiences and needs of children in care. The material then sought to link this with an explanation of why these children can have such poor educational outcomes.

The material also sought to offer school staff positive and focused strategies for working with children whose negative early experiences of loss and change can lead to challenging or confrontational behaviour. Finally, the material outlined an integrated and co-operative way of working for social workers, school staff and carers in stabilising looked-after children in school and ensuring that they attended and attained.

Stage two: Launch and implementation

The LAC Pack was launched to a multi-agency audience of foster carers, social policy and education staff in September 2006. The pack was available for every education and social care setting, with school settings being the first to receive the pack. It was decided that designated staff should be given the opportunity to attend a one-day 'Using *The LAC Pack*' training where they would be trained to navigate the materials. Three separate training days were scheduled between September and December 2006. This extended to six full days by December 2007 in order to ensure that the maximum numbers of school staff were trained and all school settings accessed. In the end, 80 out of 90 school settings had sent a member of staff to receive *The LAC Pack* and over 100 education staff had been trained in using these materials. The training was intended for LAC-designated teachers but a variety of support staff, teachers and head teachers also attended. The aim was to enable trained staff to cascade the information to colleagues in their schools. However, a number of education staff felt that they required further support in effective delivery of the materials. In order to meet this identified need, a 'Training the Trainers' session was organised and carried out in May 2007. This more dynamic approach was designed to secure the high quality of future trainers. It ensured that trained staff would 'own' the positive, informed approaches and strategies identified. Twenty-eight senior teaching staff attended this training and discussed how they might take it forward in their own schools. Once the training for schools had been carried out, half-day training sessions took place during the Autumn of 2007 for social workers, foster carers and school health staff. This helped to ensure a consistent approach to looked-after children in schools by all education and care professionals working with them.

Stage three: Embedding in the authority

An early evaluation of participants' responses highlighted that all participants felt *The LAC Pack* was a very valuable resource and would influence their practice in schools with all children. It was felt to have raised staff awareness, informing them of the issues for this vulnerable group, providing insight and understanding and making staff more sensitive and responsive to individuals. School staff reported that it boosted confidence in their ability to manage behaviour appropriately, thus avoiding the need to exclude children and young people in care.

To embed best educational practice with looked-after children throughout the authority, local school cluster forums for looked-after children were established. These forums aim to encourage positive inter-agency practice between local area schools, social workers and school health professionals who are working with children and young people in care. These twice-yearly forums make reference to LAC Pack information and strategies, and facilitate attachment training

for school clusters by those who were trained. The ultimate aim, however, is that educational, social care and health professionals will make their own agendas for the future and share their own successful practice for behaviour management, managing transitions for children in care, enhancing their learning and promoting resilience.

All schools in West Lothian now have a copy of *The LAC Pack*. Social workers and foster carers have also been informed and trained in the materials to ensure consistency of practice and expectation across the authority.

Discussion

The training to receive the pack has been a significant factor in its success. It ensured that school staff were encouraged to understand the emotional context of children in care, and to identify with their feelings through activities and discussion. Training was elective so there was clearly a need to make it count. The relevance of the materials and the interactive nature of the training meant that participants felt the sessions reflected the real experience of local children in care. This encouraged 'double-loop learning' which helped professionals to reflect safely on their own practice and to make more informed decisions in what is often a rapidly changing and uncertain context (Argyris and Schon, 1974). The trainer was able to react to needs and to change the model of delivery to allow for some further coaching for participants who felt they wanted to cascade the information. Finally, the training was credible as it was delivered by a local professional who had gathered the information through research and practice in the local area.

Many primary and secondary teachers who attended the training noted that the information in the pack had implications for other children who are not in care but who shared similar home environments and had insecure attachments. Thus school staff who had initially thought that the information only applied to a few children and young people in their schools soon understood the relevance of training staff in using positive behaviour management strategies. This ensured an increasingly high attendance at training sessions.

The training activities encouraged open discussion between school staff about their own practice. This supported head teachers in achieving a consensus of approach amongst their staff dealing with children in care. Research demonstrates that an integrated, consistent approach is particularly important when a child is presenting with high profile behaviour difficulties and is close to exclusion (Milligan and Stevens, 2006).

Subsequent developments of *The LAC Pack* have been needs-led. The decision to pilot cluster forums during the following school year, for example, was made

in discussion with participants at the first training session. The gap between the final training session and the start of the cluster forums allowed time for the training and information to build a sound basis for further ongoing discussion. This is now seen as the most important feature of *The LAC Pack* implementation in terms of building sustainability for the future.

The LAC Pack was designed to be layered and sequential. The more practical care information gave a baseline of understanding about issues for looked-after children which have been previously seen as the sole responsibility of social work. The 'attachment' section and activities helped those working with children in care to recognise the adaptive strategies which children come to learn in order to survive in their home environments. The 'crisis' section gives ideas for positive approaches to use with a child who is going through a difficult time because of care issues and whose acting-out behaviour is resulting in short-term exclusions. The emphasis on the need to attend training days ensured that school staff would not just 'lift' specific strategies and interventions without the underpinning knowledge which would make them relevant and child-centred. This was an experience-based approach, using observation and intervention with school staff and carers in helping children whose circumstances are often complex and disturbing. Working positively with looked-after children is not just about theoretical knowledge, but also about understanding the impact of their experiences and the defences they have produced.

Conclusion

The roll-out of *The LAC Pack* in West Lothian was first envisaged as a one-year process in terms of getting one trained person into every school. Through a dynamic process of response and continuing discussion with joint psychological services and social policy management, it now has developed as a three-year initiative in terms of seeing the information embedded into practice. The establishment of LAC school cluster forums is expected to ensure that *The LAC Pack* continues to provide a sound basis for improving educational outcomes for looked-after children in our schools.

References

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