

Young people's views and experiences of growing up

This study, carried out by Save the Children between 1998 and 2000, focuses on young people who were seen as having taken on responsibilities beyond their years, namely, teenage mothers, care leavers, young workers and those participating in youth organisations. It explores their views and experiences of making the transition from 'childhood' to 'adulthood', especially in relation to skills gained, support received and future aspirations. Interviews with young people revealed:

- f** Young people thought that skills gained through experience, even in difficult circumstances, were generally more relevant to growing up than formal academic learning. Many felt 'adult' at a young age because of the responsibilities or adverse circumstances they experienced as children.
- f** Many felt they did not have adequate information and support for the practicalities of independent living, especially in relation to housing, benefits, social services and education.
- f** Many felt that professional workers and parents had a limited understanding of, or denied, the emotional and practical needs of children and young people, often discriminating against them on the grounds of age.
- f** The emotional support of others, both adults and peers, was seen as equally important as practical support. Encouragement, trust and recognition were particularly important.
- f** Interviewees were generally unaware of the rights available to children and young people; however, many were very clear about what they felt they needed and what support had been lacking in their lives to date.
- f** The vast majority felt that they had coped well with difficult circumstances in the past and were optimistic about their futures.
- f** Many suggested that moving towards independence and adulthood required active support, skills training and opportunities to take on responsibility as children, but that all too often this was lacking. They had worked out ways of coping more on an *ad hoc* basis than in any co-ordinated way.
- f** These young people did not tend to consider a job, a family or a home of their own as being precursors to being or feeling adult: 'feeling adult' was equated more with competence than with status.

Background

The period of transition between childhood and adulthood has lengthened in recent decades because of changes in opportunities for education, employment and housing. This has meant young people seldom make a smooth linear transition from school to employment, from dependence to independence or from parental home to a home and family of their own.

It has also been shown that children can and do take on responsibilities at a young age that challenge the notions of both 'childhood' and 'adulthood' and blur the boundaries between the two. But because they are children they may be deemed too immature to cope with such responsibility, and their abilities and rights are often undermined, played down or ignored by adults.

This study interviewed groups of young people considered likely to have taken on responsibilities as children about their experiences of growing up, in particular looking at what skills they had acquired, what support they had been given, what had hindered them and what aspirations they held for the future.

Skills gained in childhood

Many of the young people in this research took on heavy responsibilities as children, not only in caring for others with little outside support but also through working whilst still at school. Many implied that they looked after themselves at home or had experience of looking after younger siblings or doing demanding household chores such as shopping for food or cooking meals as children. The skills gained in these roles helped them in maturing to adulthood, in becoming young mothers or in leaving care or the parental home for a home of their own.

Several said that what they had learned from such responsibilities was more relevant to them than the academic work that the school curriculum offered:

"... you don't actually need, I believe, to know what Pythagorus' theory is. You don't actually need that.

You need to know how to cook a dinner, you need to know how to handle some money or whatever." (17-year-old male).

Many also suggested that responsibility in adverse circumstances had made them grow up much faster than most other people their age and set them apart from their peers in terms of maturity:

"[My friends would be] giggling about boys and ... haircream and make-up and I'd be worrying what I'd be cooking my nan for tea when I got home and ... how I was going to get her upstairs to get her in the bath and things like that. How I was going to get my homework done and wash her, bath her, get her into bed, things like that." (20-year-old female carer).

The skills that most of these young people felt they had lacked in the past were assertiveness, confidence and communication skills. On reflection, they felt that they lacked any awareness about access to services, and their right to adequate care and protection as children. They felt that children and young people should have access to better information and advice about benefits, family support services, education and employment opportunities. Generally, they felt they had coped adequately as children within their own families in the past but lacked the practical skills needed for independent living and the 'emotional' skills of interaction and negotiation with adults which were both seen as essential for the future.

What support had young people received?

What these young people had found helpful in their childhood was emotional support, in particular encouragement, praise and having someone to talk to about concerns and feelings. Nearly a quarter of respondents mentioned having been the victims or witnesses of physical abuse within families as children, and yet many rarely received emotional support from parents, teachers and social workers,

looking more to friends for understanding and companionship.

For those who *had* found an adult they could relate to, there was often a lack of consistency and stability in such relationships, either because young people moved between schools or carers or because the adult in question moved - changing jobs, for example.

Some mentioned the fact that adults seldom listened to them or respected them as *people* rather than as children; only in their mid- to late teens had they felt they had the self-confidence to communicate more effectively with adults and to challenge certain decisions made about their lives.

Many respondents felt at a disadvantage because of a lack of information about, and support in, dealing with problems in their lives. This was partly because they had no knowledge of their rights in terms of what they should expect from education, housing, social services etc. but was also due to the fact that they received little practical or emotional help from significant adults in their lives. The most commonly cited regret was around education and qualifications and the fact that not working harder at school may have impinged on their finding a good job in the future.

Future aspirations

Most respondents felt there was a difference between 'feeling adult', 'being an adult' and 'settling down'. 'Feeling adult' came with experience and responsibility, whatever one's age; 'being an adult' was associated with legislation, rights and status; and 'settling down' implied that the transition was complete - having a happy family life, a good job and a stable income.

The vast majority of these young people aspired conventionally to a good job, a home and family of their own and future happiness and stability. The skills they felt they needed to achieve their goals centred more on the practicalities of independent living, for example, in negotiating successfully with benefits or housing agencies, and on the need for vocational or academic qualifications to ensure

obtaining their chosen careers. Many also felt that they needed confidence and self-motivation to attain their goals as well as encouragement from adults.

As with their past lives, their futures centred predominantly around the support and encouragement of others, notably family and friends. Many commented that they had developed assertiveness and empathy through maturity which helped them in seeking and benefiting from the support of others.

Conclusion

Generally, these young people had gained skills and knowledge from having taken on responsibilities as children. But they acknowledged that adults seldom recognised such experiences as making a legitimate or useful contribution to society as a whole.

The author suggests that, because of the blurring of boundaries between 'childhood' and 'adulthood', one way forward is to regard young people in terms of 'citizenship'. The full implementation of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, especially in relation to children and young people's participation in decision-making processes, would ensure that future policy and practice respected children and young people's views, rights, abilities and responsibilities as citizens.

About the study

This was a qualitative study of 108 young people in England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales, comprising 74 young women and 34 young men aged between 14 and 27. Save the Children targeted groups of young people who were deemed vulnerable because of their experiences and/or who had taken on responsibilities as children. The sample was mainly accessed through statutory and voluntary organisations working with young people. Interviews lasted on average two hours, were tape-recorded and transcribed in full and were analysed using a qualitative database. Four separate reports were also written up alongside this UK report, based on the findings from each of the four country samples.

How to get further information

The full report, **Challenging transitions: Young people's views and experiences of growing up** by Monica Barry is published by Save the Children, price £7.50 and is available from Plymbridge, Tel: 01752 202301.