

PEER RESEARCH: HOW TO MAKE A DIFFERENCE



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University
Centre for Child and Family Research

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CONTACT US

Centre for Child and Family Research

The Centre for Child and Family Research (CCFR) is a research unit based in the School of Social, Political and Geographical Sciences at Loughborough University, England. Established in 2002, the unit carries out high quality, policy relevant research into children, families and communities. CCFR's research is influential both nationally and internationally and provides the evidence base for the development of a wide range of policy initiatives, with an emphasis on those related to children in need.

www.lboro.ac.uk/research/ccfr/

Catch 22

Catch22 is a national young people's charity in England. Our services help young people develop the confidence and skills to find solutions that are right for them, whether it is getting back into school or training, choosing to stay out of trouble, finding a safe place to live or helping them to live independently after leaving care.

www.catch-22.org.uk

National Care Advisory Service

The National Care Advisory Service (NCAS) supported by Catch22, based in England, has over six years national and international experience of developing Peer Research with care leavers, academics and NGO's. NCAS work at local, regional, national and European levels to develop solutions based on good corporate parenting that include and empower young people and influence professionals and policy makers to continually improve quality and outcomes.

www.leavingcare.org

SOS Children's Villages International

SOS Children's Villages International is the umbrella organisation of more than 130 affiliated national SOS Children's Village associations worldwide. SOS Children's Villages is a non-governmental and non-denominational child-focused organisation that provides direct services in the areas of care, education and health for children at risk of losing parental care, and those who have lost parental care. The organisation also builds the capacity of the children's caregivers, their families and communities to provide adequate care. SOS Children's Villages advocates for the rights of children without parental care and those at risk of losing parental care.

www.sos-childrensvillages.org

To get in touch and see what advice, information and support you would need from CCFR, NCAS or SOS Children's Villages in relation to conducting your own Peer Research study please email ccfr@lboro.ac.uk, ncas@catch-22.org.uk or lao@sos-kd.org.



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INTRODUCTION

This pamphlet is based on our work in several Peer Research projects with children and young people. It brings together the experience of academics, NGOs and, importantly, young people who have been involved in developing Peer Research on a national and European scale.

This booklet shows the benefits of a Peer Research approach and provides some guidance on how to develop and conduct quality, ethical and effective Peer Research. The Peer Research projects described here involve children and young people in and leaving care. However, the methodology outlined in this booklet is transferable to work with other groups of young people and adults.

Central to our experience is the commitment to empowering young people to be active partners, consultants and participants in research.

Peer Research can facilitate and promote the rights of young people to express their views and to do so in an environment that is safe, educational and even fun. Furthermore, it provides young people with the opportunity to potentially inform the policy and practice of those responsible for supporting them and learn skills useful for future study or employment.

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WHAT IS PEER RESEARCH?

Peer Research involves members of the subject group taking on the role of researcher. Effective Peer Research ensures the empowerment and participation of young people by involving them in various aspects of the research, including:

- **developing the aims and objectives of the study;**
- **designing the research methodology including recruitment process and data collection methods;**
- **creating research tools (e.g. questionnaires, interview guides);**
- **undertaking data collection (e.g. interviews);**
- **analysing data, and**
- **writing up and disseminating the findings.**

The success of any Peer Research project is to ensure that there are strong relationships and partnerships. The success of the Peer Research studies carried out by the National Care Advisory Service in England and in partnership with SOS Children's Villages in Albania, Czech Republic, Finland and Poland have been built upon the relationships between academia, young people, NGOs and local authorities.

CASE STUDY: CORPORATE PARENTING

Current research on corporate parenting in England (funded by the Big Lottery) is utilising a Peer Research approach. The study has a young people's reference group to advise on the research process, design recruitment material for young people in and from care and, in partnership with the academic researcher, develop a questionnaire for the peer researchers. Twenty four young adults (aged 18 to 21) with care experience have been recruited and trained as peer researchers. They successfully carried out 297 structured interviews with young people in and from care across England. Overall, the quality of the data gathered was good and at a level expected of any newly trained researcher. Feedback has demonstrated that peer researchers have valued the opportunity to gain a range of social and personal development skills and work experience.

Leaving care workers have reported increased confidence and improved communication skills amongst the Peer Research team and peer researchers have commented on the value of hearing about the experiences of young people from different backgrounds and cultures. The experience of the Peer Research approach has been positive and has demonstrated the importance of effective and comprehensive training and of on-going support throughout to ensure that the Peer Research process is both beneficial to the research but crucially provides a useful and positive experience for young people involved as both peer researchers and as participants in the research.

www.leavingcare.org/?page_ID=100128





WHY PEER RESEARCH?

“In my experience as a peer researcher in Right2BeCared4, the most motivating part was that I was interviewing care leavers as a care leaver myself – and knowing that through this, young people were given a voice; a chance to share their opinions on the transition from care to independent living – this was the reward for our two year project.”

Peer Researcher, Right2BCared4 project

The five points below highlight the positive reasons why Peer Research works well:

1. ADDRESSES POWER RELATIONS

Peer Research addresses the potential power imbalances of being interviewed by an adult or professional. Young people we have worked with are more likely to feel more comfortable being interviewed by a peer who is of similar age and from the same background rather than be interviewed by an adult.

2. POWER OF EMPATHY

Despite the difference in gender, ethnicity and geography, young people share something, namely having been in care. It is that common experience and the ability to empathise and understand that makes Peer Research special.

3. ALLOWS A GREATER DEPTH AND INSIGHT INTO THE RESEARCH SUBJECT

By involving care leavers in the research process they can provide their insider knowledge (Smith et al. 2002) and shared experience that most researchers

would not normally have. Young people can challenge, query and question and ultimately take the lead in the process. This is true participation and empowerment with peer researchers considered as equals, sharing responsibility and working in partnership with academics and professionals.

4. OPPORTUNITIES TO LEARN RESEARCH AND LIFE SKILLS

Peer researchers do not have the same level of expertise as an academic researcher, but the bringing together of young people and professionals and their unique skills and knowledge makes it a strong and collaborative partnership.

Peer Research provides opportunities for young people to learn new transferable skills that could benefit them later in life. In addition to gaining research knowledge and learning about interview techniques, young people will gain experience of team work, collaboration and time keeping, skills that are adaptable to everyday life.

“When I was to conduct the first piece of research I was quite stressed, I was afraid that interviewees would not want to talk and wouldn’t want to share their thoughts with me. But the more research I did, the less restraint I felt and the research itself turned into an interesting conversation. Interviewees were eagerly answering the questions I asked, as these questions dealt with their own life and experience.”

Peer Researcher, *I Matter* Peer Research

“Devon involvement in the Peer Research programme has helped us realise how useful and powerful this model is. We are now looking to set up our own group of “peer researchers” who can become involved in evaluating our own services and to work with us on our service improvement plans. For the young people who were part of the project, it has given them the chance to learn some new skills which has helped them prepare for their futures as well as having a really enjoyable time.”

Ian Stewart-Watson, Operation Manager -
Permanence & Transition Service, Devon, England,
Corporate Parenting Research

5. SUPPORTS ADVOCACY FOR, WITH AND BY CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE

Influencing change and giving young people a voice is a key component of why Peer Research has a sustainable impact. In a climate of increasing youth unemployment young people learn valuable skills which can be transferred to everyday life as well as the work environment.



CASE STUDY: RIGHT2BCARED4 AND STAYING PUT EVALUATIONS

In England two government commissioned evaluations (Right2BCared4 and Staying Put: 18+ Family Placement Programme) involved working with young people who had been trained as peer researchers. Both pilots were aimed at improving outcomes for young people making the transition from care to independence. Participation in the studies gave the peer researchers the opportunity to be involved in a national evaluation and inform policy and practice development. They were involved in the development of research questions, undertaking interviews and thematic analysis and the write up of the findings, which were presented in a report designed to make the research findings accessible to young people in and leaving care.

Feedback from the peer researchers revealed that they appreciated learning new skills, participating in research covering topics they had experienced and being involved in work that has the potential to inform policy and practice development.

“Being a Peer Researcher was exciting, informative and a big learning process for me, it also helped build my confidence.”

Peer Researcher, Staying Put evaluation

In addition to the benefits for the peer researchers, the evaluations benefitted substantially from their knowledge and experience of the topics being explored.

“We were involved every step of the way, which all the young people appreciated as it was a new experience.”

Peer Researcher, Right2BCared4 evaluation

Training events were held regularly including sessions on how to conduct interviews, analyse qualitative data, confidentiality, consent, data protection and research safety and the peer researchers were supported throughout by workers from their local authority and the research team.

“The preparation and training I received was pitched at the right level and meant I knew what to expect.”

Peer Researcher, Right2BCare4 evaluation

Find out more:

Right2BCared4: www.leavingcare.org/?page_ID=100126

Staying Put: www.leavingcare.org/?page_ID=100127



CASE STUDY: I MATTER PEER RESEARCH

“What I like most about using Peer Research for advocacy is the learning effect that we can all enjoy. We are all learners in the project. The young people, peer researchers or interviewers learn skills for life or learn about their rights. Academics learn about realities that they never experienced directly through the lenses of someone who was living those realities. And decision makers learn how important it is to have first-hand key information coming from those affected by whatever decisions they make.”

Raluca Verweijen-Slamnescu, Project Manager
I Matter Peer Research

Since 2009, SOS Children's Villages has been running the *I Matter* campaign. It is an international advocacy campaign in over 20 countries in Europe and Central Asia that promotes better social inclusion of young people with care experience through quality leaving care preparation and proper after care support.

In 2011, the organisation started a Peer Research project in Albania, Czech Republic, Poland and Finland, to contribute to the three objectives of the campaign:

- increased knowledge and understanding on the problems of young people leaving care;
- empowerment and involvement of young people in decision making processes and
- improvement of legislation and practice of leaving care.

With methodological support provided by the National Care Advisory Service, about 40 young people (10 per country) were trained as peer researchers. Over 400 young people with care experience will be interviewed and share their experiences they have had when leaving care.

The basis of the interview is a semi-structured interview guide designed by 10 young people from the countries involved. The final report of the project will contain recommendations to the decision makers in each country on how the practice and policy of leaving care could be improved. Recommendations of the young people involved in the project will be presented to the European Commission in Autumn 2012.

The Peer Research project is co-financed by the European Commission.

www.sos-childrensvillages.org/News-and-Stories/Stories/Childrens-Rights/Pages/SOSChildrens-Villages-awarded-EU-funds-for-research.aspx



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FOUNDATIONS FOR SUCCESSFUL PEER RESEARCH

“Peer Research is unique in one respect – the researchers have already travelled the same journey as the young people they are interviewing. But it is also important that their work is supported by experienced researchers – it is a partnership.”

Mike Stein, Research Professor, University of York, England



In our experience the following foundations are needed to ensure a successful Peer Research project for young people and key partners.

CLEAR PROCESS

There needs to be a clear process and plan that outlines how young people will be involved but also the training and support that they will receive. The process should be clearly defined so young people are aware of what is expected of them and what they will be doing in the research. Without a clear process the research might lose its focus or stagnate, which will ultimately have a negative impact upon the peer researchers, the young people who take part as research participants and the quality of the work.

SELECTION OF YOUNG PEOPLE

To be engaged appropriately in a research project, young people need to have the confidence and ability to be able to conduct interviews but also, just as importantly, the commitment to be involved for the duration of the study and engage with all of the research process. The aim is to identify those young people who are motivated and can commit their resources and strengthen them in their abilities and capacities.

PREPARATION AND TRAINING OF YOUNG PEOPLE

Preparation and training of young people are vital elements of any Peer Research project. Young people need to understand why they are involved and this is underpinned by a training process that

covers key components of research and interview techniques. Training should not be rushed and must be thorough but at the same time thought provoking and enjoyable. The ultimate aim is to ensure that young people have the skills and confidence to participate in research.

SUPPORT FOR YOUNG PEOPLE THROUGHOUT THE PROCESS

Young people need to be properly supported throughout any research process. Being involved in research, including the conducting of interviews, can be intensive and tiring and young people need to be able to access support from a research lead/social worker/carer so they can express their concerns or even just to confirm that the interviews went well. Young people cannot be expected to be self-sufficient and support themselves; they need to have a dedicated person to whom they can turn to for advice, information and support. It is good practice in any research to support researchers through supervision and this is something you may want to consider when conducting a Peer Research study.

PARTNERSHIP

The success of the Peer Research projects that have been conducted is based on partnership and collaboration between young people, local authority staff, NGOs and academia. Partners bring their own level of knowledge, expertise and experience, which enhances and enriches the Peer Research process. Working in isolation not only undermines the research process, but also affects the quality of the



support and training to young people, who are an essential part of the process.

ADEQUATE FUNDING

Including young people in research requires adequate funding. Funding should cover the training of young people in research skills, payments for peer researchers and interviewees, travel costs associated with conducting interviews and costs of supporting staff to oversee the research process. To involve young people in research is not cheap but it should not be compromised in order to reduce costs.

TIMESCALES

Our experience highlights the need to allow generous timescales when involving young people in research. Enough time should be allowed for training, support, design and structure of the interview schedule, pilot the interview schedule, arrange and conduct interviews, review and analyse the findings and complete a report. Timescales should be realistic so that young people's meaningful participation is not compromised.

ETHICS FRAMEWORK (SAFETY)

The safety of peer researchers is of paramount concern. Any Peer Research project should follow an ethics framework that scrutinises the research process and the involvement of young people to ensure that safety comes first – no interview is worth completing if a young person feels vulnerable and unsafe.

CONSIDERATIONS AND CHALLENGES

There are a number of considerations and challenges that interested parties must be aware of when wanting to start a Peer Research project.

Involving young people in research is an exciting learning opportunity for all but young people are inexperienced in research methods compared to professional researchers and as a result there could be variability in data. This could be overcome by following the essential criteria with an emphasis of quality training and by following a clear process.

The potential methodological issues of working with peer researchers need to be considered. Concerns have been raised about the efficacy of the process and quality of the data, in particular its validity and reliability. It is unlikely that young people recruited as peer researchers will possess the same skills and level of expertise as trained and experienced academic researchers (Smith et al. 2002). Given that they are also members of the researched group they may have their own agendas, which could steer them to ask leading questions/or present the data in a misleading manner. To avoid this, a high level of professionalism and standardisation is required; incorporating continued training, monitoring and sustained contact throughout the research study (Clark, 2004; Burns and Schubotz, 2009). Our experience shows this can be done and the results are good.

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A LOVING HOME FOR EVERY CHILD



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Our collective experience of working with peer researchers, over the past six years on various research studies, has highlighted how effective it can be as a research method. It has been a learning process for all involved and the training, support and research activities have evolved and adapted to meet the needs of the studies and the peer researchers. This pamphlet outlines the benefits of employing a Peer Research approach, the elements required to effectively implement the methodology, challenges experienced and lessons learned.

Peer Research provides the means to secure quality data as well as maximising opportunities to empower children and young people to have a voice, develop transferable skills and inform policy and practice. If planned and delivered properly, through providing quality training and support to peer researchers and maintaining integrity, Peer Research can contribute towards the efficacy of the research and provide an inclusive, empowering and educational experience for all, especially for young people.