

Research Findings

Family life: the significance of family to homeless young people.



give homeless
young people
a future

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1. Introduction

Family breakdown is a root cause of youth homelessness. Despite early signs of recovery in some areas of the economy, unemployment levels are continuing to rise which is likely to increase the stress and burden on families for many months to come. Difficult financial times for families put even greater pressure on relationships between family members. In 2008/9, 58%¹ of the young people who came to Centrepont reported they had to leave home because of arguments, relationship breakdown or being told to leave. With extra strain caused by lower standards of living, the problem of youth homelessness due to relationship breakdown is likely to intensify.

In recent years, the Government has made renewed efforts to tackle this issue, for example, by providing funding for extra family mediation services². Despite these efforts, thousands of young people still experience homelessness every year³ because disputes with their families escalate to the point where they are made or feel forced to leave home.

It is with this backdrop that Centrepont conducted research into how homeless young people understand the role of family, and why some familial relationships break down. The project also sought to understand if and how these relationships can be rebuilt. A number of key groups were included in the research

including young refugees, young parents and care leavers to determine whether these groups had a different concept of family to other young people. The study also investigated young people's views of current services aimed at helping families reconcile, to understand the barriers to taking up these services and what else young people would find useful to help them get on better with their families.

Methodology

Sixty homeless young people aged 16-25 were interviewed between December 2008 and March 2009 in a mix of one-to-one interviews and small focus groups. Two-thirds of the young people interviewed were living in Centrepont services in London or the North East of England. To gain better national representation, the final third were recruited through other youth homelessness⁴ agencies in Bradford, Nottinghamshire, Redcar and Cheltenham. Young refugees⁵, young parents and care leavers were all included in the sample to determine whether these groups had different views and experiences of family from other young people.

These interviews were supplemented with a short tick-box questionnaire which was completed by 117 young people to help quantify a number of key issues.

Staff from Centrepont and the other participating agencies were also interviewed to gain a greater understanding of how current services are

1. Of those who told us why they had to leave home. Centrepont statistics 2008/9

2. Communities and Local Government, Tackling Youth Homelessness: Policy Briefing 18, March 2007.

3. A recent research study which conducted by Centrepont and York University and funded by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation found that at least 75,000 young people experienced homelessness in 2006/7 (Youth Homelessness in the UK, JRF, 2008).

4. Coatham House, Key House, New Roots Housing Project and Cheltenham Community Project (CCP)

5. All refugees interviewed were from Centrepont's London services. 17 young refugees were interviewed in total, making up 28% of the total 60 interviews. This is in line with the proportion of young people at Centrepont who are refugees (27% of young people at Centrepont in 2008/9 were refugees).

working on the ground, in order to produce more informed policy recommendations.

In the sections that follow, where percentages are quoted, the data is taken from the quantitative survey responses. All other data cited is from the qualitative interviews. Quotes from the qualitative interviews are labelled with the young person's name*, age, gender, and whether they are out of London. This geographical distinction was chosen as there were distinct differences in responses from young people in London and the other locations on some issues. The exact locations outside London have not been included to avoid risk of breaching young people's confidentiality, as the number interviewed in some areas was quite small.

* All names have been changed to protect the young people's identity.

2. Summary

This report provides an insight into the lives that homeless young people lead, and in particular to their experiences of family. In order to gain a better understanding of the role that family plays in their lives, young people from Centrepont and other homelessness services across England were interviewed and asked to complete a short questionnaire⁶.

The majority of young people were in some contact with their family, but over a fifth (22%) said that they had no contact at all. For some, contact with their family was very strained or infrequent, but some reported having very positive relationships, often with extended family. Many said their family relationships had improved since they moved out as having their own space helped them to deal with the disputes more effectively.

Young people generally agreed there was a special bond between blood relations that meant they were more likely to be there for each other, but many felt that being family was also about treating each other well. Blood relations could therefore lose 'family' status, and step parents or friends could become family if they cared for them and were always there.

The main benefit of family identified by young people was knowing that someone is always there to provide both practical help and emotional support. However, the vast majority of young people complained of frequent arguments. For most, these arguments were a culmination of lots of rebellion issues such as staying out late. For a minority, a single more fundamental issue was at

the root of the problem, such as parents refusing to accept a young person's sexuality or a personality clash with a step-parent. Very few talked issues through with their families, and a large number felt as though their families did not listen to them.

When asked what family relationships should ideally be like, homeless young people raised very similar issues to young people at large⁷, such as families needing to be loving and caring. But homeless young people placed a greater emphasis than other young people on the need for parents to give young people more freedom.

The role of friends varied quite widely between different young people. Those with little or no contact with family relied on them a great deal, but others preferred to rely on family as they were more trustworthy than friends and felt you could not always rely on friends to be there. Level of reliance on support services also varied, but the majority had relied on them for practical support with issues such as benefits applications. A significant minority, particularly male young people, said they would not seek emotional support from anyone and preferred to rely on themselves.

Young people's opinions were split as to the value of family mediation services which help young people and their families to find solutions to their disputes. Half (50%) did not think it would have been useful for them, because their families were too stubborn and would never change, or because their families would see it as too intrusive. Some who had tried mediation also felt that it dragged

6. In-depth interviews were conducted with 60 homeless young people aged 16-25, and a quantitative survey was conducted with 117.

7. Investigated in Gillies, V., Ribbens McCarthy, J., and Holland J, Pulling together, pulling apart: The family lives of young people, Family Policy Studies Centre/Joseph Rowntree Foundation (2001).

up painful issues without dealing with them. The other half however, were more positive, but most felt it would have been useful to them when they were younger rather than now, suggesting that early intervention is critical.

Opinion was also mixed about respite services, which provide accommodation for young people for a fixed period when they are facing relationship breakdown with their families, with the goal of later moving back home. Young people felt that these services must be linked with other mediation work or otherwise it would simply be running away from the problem. A number of young people said they had found informal breaks away with extended family and friends useful, so thought respite of some sort may be beneficial.

Care leavers

Care leavers tended to have a more complicated concept of family than other young people, including a mix of biological family, foster families and friends. They were more likely to say that they are closer to their friends as for many care leavers, friends had been a more stable influence than family. Their ideas about the role of family and ideal family relationships, however, were broadly similar to other young people.

Refugees

Young refugees' experiences and needs were quite different to other young people. Most had had very good relationships with their family in their country of origin, but could not contact them either because they could not be found or out of fear for their safety. Their main challenge

was to build new support networks in the UK and cope with the pain of missing their families. Refugees tended to rely on service staff and non-familial networks for support more than other young people, but some found it difficult to build effective support networks either due to language or cultural barriers, or due to a perceived need to find settled housing before building a life for themselves. Such a reluctance to build effective support networks can often lead to or exacerbate feelings of isolation and depression.

Young parents

The majority of the young parents interviewed were no longer in a relationship with their child's other parent, but were still in contact with them to facilitate visits to see the child. All said that they enjoyed being a parent, but some wished they had waited until they were older or until they were in a stable relationship. A number of parents, particularly young mothers, reported that, after an initial period of shock, having a child had brought them and their families closer together. All young fathers interviewed wanted to play a role in their child's life. Several had had absent fathers themselves, and were therefore determined to be around for their own children.

Policy recommendations

The research findings suggest that early intervention is crucial if young people are to successfully rebuild relationships with their families. High quality mediation and respite services will play a crucial role in achieving this, and more support should also be targeted at young parents and refugees to ensure they have strong support networks in place.

Early intervention - Early intervention systems must be established to ensure families are offered help before the relationship is irreparably damaged.

- Frontline staff in all organisations working with young people (e.g. schools, GPs) should be trained to recognise the signs of young people experiencing problems at home.
- There should be more education in schools about homelessness to help dispel young people's unrealistic expectations of what would happen if they left home. This could be delivered by formerly homeless young people themselves, as is the case with the Centrepont Youth Educators' Programme.
- Funding should be made available for greater provision of therapeutic counselling in both statutory and specialist voluntary services to help teach young people the skills they need to communicate more effectively and resolve disputes with their families.
- DCSF should consider placing a stronger emphasis on communication skills and how to resolve disputes in the PSHE curriculum.

Mediation - Access routes to high quality specialist mediation services must be improved.

- Better publicity of family mediation services and improved referral routes from all organisations working with young people.
- Greater provision of mediation services to ensure services are available as and when families are willing to engage with them.
- Soft outcomes of mediation services, such as improved relationships without moving home, must be acknowledged by funders.

- Services should be flexible to make it easier for families to engage. Sessions should be offered at times which suit the family, and in places where they feel comfortable, including in-home sessions if appropriate.
- All mediation staff should receive training in how to interact with young people effectively in order to help young people feel comfortable and engage with the process.
- Mediation services should involve extended family where appropriate. They can often act as informal mediators, and it may be possible to rebuild these relationships even if they cannot reconcile with parents.

Respite - Respite services should be more widely available to give young people some temporary breathing space to help them resolve their differences with their families.

- These services would provide an opportunity for intensive mediation work with families.

Support for parents - There should be more support for parents and extended family.

- In-home one-to-one support for parents of young people who are displaying rebellious behaviour should be more widely available. Peer support from other parents may be a useful source of assistance.
- The Government should make it easier for extended family to foster young people who become estranged from their parents, including through providing more financial support.

Greater support for young refugees - It is not possible for most young refugees to reunite with their families, so the focus should be on supporting them to build a new life for themselves, and developing new support networks.

- Peer mentoring and education schemes should be developed so young refugees who are more settled can advise others and encourage them to make friends and access support.

3. Homeless young people's perceptions of family

3.1 Level of contact with family

Over a fifth of young people (22%) who completed the survey said that they had no contact at all with their families, but nearly half (45%) said they had contact with their families at least every couple of weeks, with a quarter (23%) saying they spoke to them at least once a week. The remaining third (32%) were only in occasional contact.

The interviews concurred with these results, as the majority of young people reported being in some contact with their families. For some, this was only sporadic contact by phone or email: some young people reported that they would still periodically fall out with their family members. But most felt that they had at least one family member who they could contact if they wanted to. Some young people were very close with some family members, seeing them on a regular basis.

Those who had only been with their service provider for less than a month are the most likely to have no contact with their family (36% compared to 22% of the total). Staff suggested that this was because young people who had just left home were more likely to refuse contact with their families, or to find their parents did not want any contact. But they noted that young people and their families were often more willing to start rebuilding contact after a few weeks or months apart.

Care leavers

Most of the care leavers interviewed still had some contact with some of their biological family members, and a number had contact with

previous foster families who they had had good relationships with. Only one was not in touch with any of her biological family, and still held a great deal of anger about the abuse she had suffered.

Young refugees

The vast majority of young refugees interviewed came over to the UK without any of their family members, and only a small minority were in contact with any of their family members. A handful had extended family members in the UK who they were in contact with occasionally, and another could contact his family back in his country of origin by telephone. But the majority had absolutely no contact with their families, and did not even know where they were or if they were dead or alive.

3.2 Who young people see as their family

Most young people identified family as those who they were closest to or who had treated them well. Not all biological family automatically earned family status, and some non-familial contacts could become 'family' by being close and caring for them.

"He's not really my family. He's just a biological father, he was not there for me mentally, bringing me out to places: family visits, father son talks or anything." Asif, male, 18, London

"For me, even if they're not related to me by blood, if they're close to me and there for me then I'll class them as family." Damien, male, 18, London

When asked who makes up their family, most young people thought first of the family that they used to live with. For most this was mum, dad, siblings, but for others grandparents were their primary carers.

“My nan is the person that comes first in my life. She’s the top person in my life. Noone else, just her. She’s the first person I’d go to. She always has been. My mam never has been. I never talked to my mam, always me nana.” Nicole, female, 17, Out-of-London

Some (more often young refugees than those born in the UK) spontaneously included their extended family in their family unit. These young people tended to have a close relationship with their extended family and see them regularly. Most, however, only acknowledged aunts and grandparents as part of their family when specifically asked. A minority felt that extended family were not really part of their family as they are not as close with them. One young person remarked that they were ‘relatives’ rather than family.

“Family people are the ones that you’ve grown up with and are around you all the time. You don’t necessarily trust them but they are meant to be there for you... Cousins and aunts and that, they’ve got their own families to look after. They’re just relatives.” Jemila, female, 17, London

Some young people also spontaneously included a number of close friends in their family unit. But most only raised the idea that friends could be family when asked specifically, and some felt that

they could never be put in the same box as family. Young people from London services were more likely to include friends in their family unit. The reason for this is unclear.

“Friends here can be family too if they’re there for you.” Alesha, female young refugee, 21, London

Care leavers

When care leavers were asked who family is for them, most pinpointed a mix of both biological and foster families. If foster parents had been good to them young people tended to see them as family, but not if they had treated them badly. When asked about their successful foster placements, many referred to feeling like part of the family or being treated as part of the family.

Most still identified at least some of their biological family as family, and some saw their biological families as somehow closer to them than their foster parents, even if their foster parents had been good to them. This suggests an idea that one’s biological family has a special bond that cannot be broken, even by time spent in care.

3.3 Positive things about family

On the whole, young people agree that family is important and see it as something separate or distinct from the relationship they have with most of their friends. Friends and others can often perform similar roles, whereby they can gain the label of ‘family’, but young people commonly raised the idea that there is a link with your family that can never be broken.

“[Despite all the arguments] I still love them all, like, you’ve got to don’t you. They’re your mum and dad at the end of the day.” Scott, male, 19, Out-of-London

The most commonly cited benefit of family was “knowing that you always have someone there for you”. Some felt that family often forgive you for things that others do not and that they are more likely than friends to be there in bad times. Other key benefits of family which young people identified were having someone to love you and care for you emotionally.

“Family’s important - everyone knows that - regardless of whether you have disagreements or not...you can have friends but family are always the ones that are going to have your back no matter what... Family is everything... they see every side of you in good times and bad times.” Carlos, male, 19, London

Other positives of family included that family give you good advice, and help educate you both academically and morally. A number also mentioned that their family could help them out with money, or other practical things, like buying them food or contributing to their utility bills.

“Despite our problems and that which we had later on, they were always there for me since I was a child, so I do have to appreciate them for that. They never left me hungry or anything. I always had clothes on my back and that sort of thing. And also some principles and values they taught me. I value them for that.” Male, 18, London

Young people felt it was important that families can argue and have fights but despite these issues, you know they will always be there for you in tough times.

“I believe that my family will always be there. Despite how we are now, I know if it was coming on to serious and important stuff they would be there.” Damien, male, 18, London

“Family they’re important - they keep you together. Regardless of what they say, family always want the best for you.” Jason, young father, 23, London

“My family knows all my inner secrets. They know my personality well because I grew up with them. They know all the hardships and troubles I went through, and I know all the hardships they went through. You know them in and out. It is rare that a family member can surprise you.” Asif, male, 18, London

Refugees

Virtually all the young refugees interviewed had positive memories of family back in their countries of origin. Very few reported having argued much with their families, and most described family life as a very loving and caring atmosphere.

“Family is your foundation to life...your family are your roots.” Alesha, female young refugee, 21, London

Care leavers

When asked what distinguishes foster families where they were happy from foster families that treated them badly, most simply said that the key was simply listening to what they need and caring for them.

“They listen to you and take time to be with you. That’s it really.” Lindsay, Female care leaver, 24, Out-of-London

3.4 Negative things about family

For the majority of young people interviewed, the key negatives about family were around arguments. A minority described physical abuse and being exploited by their parents, but for most verbal conflict was the basis of their problems.

For the majority of young people interviewed (except for young refugees and care leavers), these arguments were one of the main reasons they had to leave home.

Causes of arguments

For most of the young people interviewed, arguments with their families were about fairly typical rebellion issues – staying out late, getting in trouble, not helping out at home – but the sheer scale and frequency of these arguments meant that they became too difficult to cope with.

“Something really small can change into something really big sometimes.” Kirsty, young mother, 17, Out-of-London
“[We used to argue about] Just everything! Me going out all the time, getting drunk all the time too young. I think you get to a certain age and

you want to be independent, you want to do your own thing so just that on its own can cause you to argue, argue about different things.” Jess, young mother, 22, Out-of-London

The arguments therefore often focused around the young person wanting more freedom. In many cases, young people felt that their parents did not have a right to try and control what they did, and did not accept parental objections to, for example, their consumption of alcohol or drugs.

“They try their best, like, but they was treatin’ me like a little kid. How do they expect you to mature when they’re still treating you like a kid.” Simon, male, 16, Out-of-London

Some felt that these arguments were due to the fact that their parents did not trust them and always assumed the worst of them, with some saying that their parents always dragged up their past mistakes.

A number of young people also complained that their parents were very stubborn meaning that they could never talk about things. Some therefore felt that their parents did not listen to them and which meant that they did not get along because their parents did not understand them.

“They’re not there to see everything you go through, so they can’t comment on everything.” Jemila, female, 17, London

“Just because you’re a kid they think they don’t have to listen to you. Everyone deserves to be listened to, don’t they.” Lindsay, female care leaver, 24, Out-of-London

For a minority of young people, there were more fundamental issues which lay at the heart of their conflicts with their families, ranging from physical abuse to issues over religion or personality clashes with step-parents. Young people experiencing these sorts of issues were less likely to think that the problems would ever be resolved.

“I felt a bit rejected for my beliefs. I felt a very large gap between us after that [his conversion] happened. It wasn’t the same as it was before. That was hard for me. I didn’t understand why they wouldn’t appreciate my faith.” Damien, male, 18, London

“My stepdad is the reason I’m here... I hate him. He disrespects my mum in front of my face... so we can’t get on.” Musa, male, 21, London

A minority of young people reported that their parents had personal or health problems which harmed their relationship. For example, a number reported that their parents had alcohol or substance misuse problems which caused a rift between them, both due to the effect that it had on their parent’s behaviour and the fact that the young person hated seeing their parents harming themselves through their drink or drug use. Even in cases where the parents’ substance misuse was less severe, young people reported that it still caused a rift as it angered young people

when they saw their parents engaged in the sorts of behaviour they were punished for, such as using cannabis or getting drunk. Others also had parents with mental health problems which put a strain on their relationship as they did not feel that they could rely on their parents and often felt a great deal of pressure to take on extra responsibility in the home.

“She’d come home drunk and start arguing with me. She’d be crying and I’d have to try sorting her out and just calm her down and stuff.” Vicky, female, 18, Out-of-London

“Sometimes I felt like I was the adult and they were the kids. I was the one saying you gotta do this, you gotta do that. I was basically like the adult, and they were like the kids. And basically, I think I’ve grown up a little quick. But in a way it’s good but in a way it’s bad. But you’ve just got to deal with it.” Liam, male, 18, London

Even where parents did not display diagnosable destructive behaviours, some were angry about what they saw as poor parenting and their |parents putting their own needs before those of their children.

“I was in hospital last year and I obviously wanted my mam there, but she went away on holiday for a week instead.” Nicole, female, 17, Out-of-London

Others acknowledged that some of the responsibility for the problems laid with them and the damaging behaviour patterns they had becoming involved in. Some could, in hindsight,

recognise that their behaviour had been unacceptable and could understand the hurt this had caused their parents. Some made references to previous drug or alcohol misuse, but a more common regret was the way which they had treated or spoken to their family members.

“I’ve let them down so many times that they don’t know what to believe anymore.” Stacey, female, 17, Out-of-London

How they deal with arguments

Only a very small number of the young people interviewed said that they would talk things through when they had arguments with their families. Some said that they tended to stand their ground, leading to loud and nasty arguments. Most however, reported that they would simply leave to let things cool off. Some found that things would have improved when they got back, but others said that arguments continued to fester and never really got resolved.

“I’ve had arguments with my mum before and the best thing to do is just keep away, stay away and let it cool down.” Asif, male, 18, London

“What would normally happen is, if a big row would kick off or something, one of us would walk out, we wouldn’t speak for 2 or 3 days and then it would be fine.” Shane, male, 18, London

Young Refugees’ pain at being away from their families

Most refugees reported that they had had very good relationships with their families back at home. Missing their families was therefore the

main problem they face, rather than dealing with arguments. The fond memories they held of their family life at home made it very difficult for many of the young refugees to be apart from them. Many wished that they could contact them just to check that they are alive and well. A number reported being very lonely in the UK so far away from their families, and experiencing a feeling of emptiness without their families around them.

“You always need family to support you every single day. Now I live on my own, I understand what family is.” Abdi, male young refugee, 19, London

“You get used to being apart, but occasionally it hits you.” Halima, female young refugee, 20, London

“Everything around me reminds me of them. It makes me sad inside. It’s bad, it’s really bad.” Fana, female young refugee, 21, London

3.5 How their family relationships have changed over time

Some young people report that their family relationships have improved over time. Most attributed this to moving out and getting their own space. They mentioned that they and their family had fewer arguments, and found disputes easier to deal with now they had their own place. They very much valued being able to get away and cool off, and not have to be around them all the time ‘winding each other up’.

“Now it’s alright cos I can go round and see them all and can just leave when I’ve had enough.” Shane, male, 18, London

“When I go and see my mum now, she’s really happy to see me. So instead of arguing we’ll just chat because we haven’t seen each other for a while.” Kerry, young mother, 16, Out-of-London

“I used to argue with mum all the time but now, when you grow up you don’t do it anymore do you. We get on fine now... I moved out when I was 18 and since I moved out we’ve been fine... We’re not in each other’s pockets. I can do what I want here and I don’t have anyone to answer to.” Jess, young mother, 22, Out-of-London

Many mentioned that getting this space and chance to gain more independence was one of the key ways that organisations can help young people improve family relationships.

A number also mentioned that moving out helped them to become more independent, and that their family relationships improved because their family could see that they were ‘growing up’ and meeting their new responsibilities.

“If feels good for them to see that you’re growing up, you feel like you have got responsibilities to go and check on them and see how they’re doing.” Carlos, male, 19, London

“I don’t think they actually realised that I could look after myself. My mum always says that she’s really proud of me because I proved everybody wrong cos they thought they’d kick

me out and I’d fall flat on my face and come back, but I didn’t.” Kirsty, young mother, 17, Out-of-London

3.6 How they would ideally like their family to be

When asked what were the key elements of an ideal family relationship, the most common response was that family members have to respect each other. This may be linked to the fact that many young people felt that their family did not listen to them. Listening to what each other has to say and respecting each other’s ideas is therefore very important to many young people. Linked to this, a number felt that their parents should have given them more freedom. Research into the perspectives of young people more generally (i.e. not homeless young people) found similar patterns, but only among a minority. The majority appeared to feel that their parents allowed them an acceptable level of autonomy⁸.

“You’ve got to respect each other haven’t you - treat people as you’d want to be treated, look out for each other.” Kerry, young mother, 16, Out-of-London

“Families should treat each other with respect. I never used to with mine and that’s something that will never go away. I respect my family now but I’ve not always done and, as with a lot of people, there’s regrets.” Lauren, young mother, 22, Out-of-London

8. Gillies, V., Ribbens McCarthy, J., and Holland J, Pulling together, pulling apart: The family lives of young people, Family Policy Studies Centre/Joseph Rowntree Foundation (2001), p16.

When asked what they would have liked to have been different, a small number of young people wished that their parents had been more responsible and done a better job of looking after the household, and that they had not got involved in destructive behaviour such as drug taking. Another (who had not had many rules growing up) felt that boundaries and discipline were an important part of parenting, and said this was something she wished she had had a little more of.

“When it comes to parent child, it’s always good for the parent to set boundaries. Even though growing up I never had boundaries, I never had a curfew, I could just basically do what I wanted, I do like sometimes wish that I’d had more boundaries growing up... I think it’s always good for children to have boundaries, and for children to understand who the parent is... My mum was always more like a friend to me. I never really saw her as a mother figure or as an authority figure”. Lisa, female, 17, London

Some also wished that their parents had put them before new boyfriends or girlfriends. Young people suggested that parents should put their children above all else and want to give their children everything they can – something which not all felt they had enjoyed.

“They should treat you good. You’re their kid at the end of the day, flesh and blood. They should do anything for you.” Sam, male, 16, Out-of-London

Other than these factors, the characteristics of an ideal family were very similar to the themes raised in what in what is positives about their families now, such as being loved, looking out for each

other etc. This is largely in line with the views of the wider population of young people who pinpointed being caring, loving, and being there as some of the key attributes of a good parent .

Most young people could not pinpoint factors that would have made their family experiences easier, and felt that their past had helped shape who they are.

“I don’t think I’d have wanted it to be any different, because I don’t think I’d be where I am now or the person I am.” Hannah, female, 22, Out-of-London

9. Ibid, p19

4. Support networks outside the family

Young people were asked about what other sources of support they had outside of their family that they could rely on if they needed them. For some, these non-familial support networks were very important, but others prefer to rely on their families. A significant minority, more often of male young people, said that they would not talk to anyone if they were upset or had a problem, and instead tend to rely on themselves. Some put this down to their personalities, but others appear to avoid relying on others due to bad experiences in their past.

"I've worked out that telling people stuff gets you in more trouble than you were in before."
Hannah, female, 22, Out-of-London

"I look out for myself now. That's the only person who can look after you." Sam, male, 16, Out-of-London

"I'm not a very open person, that's how I've always been since I was little. It's just the way I am." Shane, male, 18, London

4.1 Role that their friends play in their lives

Most would agree that friends can be as close as family, and most felt that they had friends that they could rely on if they needed them. Those with little or no contact with their families (such as care leavers) were particularly likely to rely on their friends.

"Friends can actually be family cos I talk to them more than I do my mum. My friends are there for me, and sometimes my family is not

there for me all the time." Michelle, female care leaver, 21, London

"You can be as close to a friend as you are to your parents or your brothers and sisters and cousins. It depends on that individual." Jason, male, 23, London

Some young people said that they would probably go to their friends before their family if they had a problem. Reasons for this included that their friends had a better understanding of what they were going through, that friends were less likely to get angry about things and that there were some things (e.g. problems with their boyfriend/girlfriend) that they would not want to talk to their family about.

"I look at my friends as my chosen family. My biological family... where I don't want to stress them or anything, they probably see the side of me that's always good and never has any problems. But with my friends, my chosen family, it's like they see more of the reality of how my life really is." Lisa, female, 17, London

Others, however, felt that there was something inherently different about the relationship between friends and family, for example, that trust within a family is a given, but with friends it had to be earned.

"Some friends in a bad situation they don't care about you, they just leave you alone. But family, they care about you every time because they love you, not like friends." Isa, male young refugee, 17, London

"It depends on how good the friends are. Family would do near enough anything for you really, depending on their needs. Friends, depends on how long you've know them and close you are to them, for them to do something big for you." Musa, male, 21, London

For some, this meant that they could never hold friends as close as family. Some had had bad experiences in the past of being 'stabbed in the back' by people they thought of as friends, so feel they could never really trust friends again. This attitude was more common in young people outside London, but the reason for this geographical disparity was unclear.

How close friendships are built up

When asked how they made these friends, young people generally said that the main way was going through things together, and friends 'proving' that they can be trusted by being there for them when they needed it.

"Close friends are just ones who start off as associates but then when you need help they go the extra mile for you." Alesha, female young refugee, 21, London

"After a little while when friends started fading away and fading away, I looked at the people around me and I thought to myself, these people are going be with me for life. They're like my backbone." Ella, female, 18, London

How young refugees built up support networks

Some of the young refugees interviewed had been in the UK for a number of years, but some had only arrived very recently. This meant that their experiences of integration and building up support networks were often very different.

On the whole, non-familial support networks appear to play more of a role for refugees than other young people, particularly those who no longer have any contact with their family. Virtually all young people said that they had a few close friends whom they could rely on to help them out if they needed something, but for young refugees, these friends seemed to make up a larger proportion of the total support network. Young refugees were more likely than other young people receiving support from Centrepont to say that they would go to staff for help with emotional as well as practical issues.

A number reported that they found the support of other young people from their country helpful. Several had other young people living in their service (hostel/flat) who were from their country of origin. Having someone who they could communicate easily with was helpful for many, and some received advice from their peers which helped them get to grips with the system and other basic issues such as where the local shops were. One young female noted that another girl in the service felt like a sister to her, as she had helped her with practical things like her education, but was also there for her emotionally and helped her adjust to being on her own by sharing her own experiences with her. A number said that they would keep in touch with the other young people people in the service after they left.

Others however, were very concerned about the importance of learning English, and therefore preferred to spend time with native English speakers in order to improve their language skills. For these young people, other young people in the service who are not from their country of origin were an important source of companionship.

Other sources of support included friends from college or work, and some young refugees relied on support networks formed through religious institutions, such as their local church.

Refugees often appear to feel in a state of 'limbo' and do not feel that they can devote time to making friends or building support networks until they have found permanent housing. Some also mentioned that moving around a lot made it really difficult to build up strong relationships. This is likely to be a barrier to their successful integration. Staff members noted that this can also lead young people to feel as though staff are not being supportive if they do not find them permanent housing, even if there are no move-on options available. This, along with a failure or unwillingness to build up effective support networks, can often lead to and exacerbate feelings of isolation and depression.

4.2 Role of service staff

All but a handful of young people reported that they had received help with practical matters, such as applying for benefits. Most young people said that this help had been very beneficial, with only a few reporting that they were not happy with the support

they received, often because they did not get the outcome they wanted, for example in finding social housing or good quality, affordable private sector move-on accommodation.

Where young people differed more markedly was in their level of reliance on service staff for emotional support. As mentioned above, several young people said they did not speak to anyone if they were upset, and some said that they preferred to speak to their friends or family about personal problems. Others, however, said that they often spoke to service staff if they were upset, and even those who did not take up this support regularly said it was helpful to know that staff are there if they did need them.

"I don't know what else they could do cos they've given us so much. Even times when I feel like I'm down, I'll come downstairs and whoever's around you can speak to them cos they're all people that you can be on the level with... you can have a word and they will give you the best advice they possibly can." Ella, female, 18, London

"When you're in supported housing the members of staff here are your family. They're looking out for you and doing things for you. My keyworker's always looking out for me, and everything she does is for my best interests. If she thinks I'm doing something wrong which will long term get me hurt, or won't help my situation, she'll tell me. And it's really good because I know with her no matter what she says is 100% the truth." Stuart, male, 20, Out-of-London

“If I get stressed out about anything I just come and see the staff.” Sarah, young mother, 20, Out-of-London

For those who do not talk to service staff very often, the main way in which they felt Centrepont and other agencies could help them is to give them their own space. For these young people, Centrepont and the other agencies were simply a place to sleep and access services, rather than acting as a surrogate family.

“Some people just need space, so on that part, I think Centrepont is doing a good thing by providing that space for people. Cos if you give yourself space, afterwards you’re going to feel like you have to go and speak to your family, because in a way you’re going to start to miss them. So even without the counselling, you’re going to feel like... ‘I miss my family’ and you’re going to try and talk to them. Just providing that space is enough, well... it was enough for me.” Carlos, male, 19, London

For many, this was because they were aware that they were only living at the service temporarily so there was no point building emotional connections. A minority also stressed the importance of young people learning to support themselves, so service staff should only be there to help them if they cannot cope on their own.

“There’s nowhere I can call home, not since I left my mum’s. I’ve settled in here fine, but in the back of my head this isn’t home. I just hate moving – I must have moved 35 times in my life, jumping from plane, to coach to train, to bus, just all over the place.” Kate, female, 21, Out-of-London

“They can’t give everything because it’s about fending for ourselves as well.” Mike, male care leaver, 22, London

A few young people, particularly those with higher support needs, identified a number of barriers to accessing services. These included an unwillingness to admit that they needed help, and not wanting to engage with services when they have been unable to help them in the past.

“I don’t want to go out and seek help that much, because I’d rather forget about everything than have to keep being reminded every day of what’s been going on. I’d rather forget about it and move on, but if I go out and get help then I’ve got to talk about it and that’s a lot of pressure... After a while I think, fk it, this ain’t getting me anywhere. I’m just talking to them and that is it. It’s alright to talk but then where does it get me... I can’t see the light and where it’s going to lead me too.” Kate, female, 21, Out-of-London**

Refugees – how far services can play the role of the family

On the whole, young refugees were more likely than other young people to emphasise the positive effects that Centrepont’s support had had on improving their situation. All of those interviewed pinpointed help with practical issues, such as providing them with somewhere to live and helping them access benefits and learning courses. Many also noted help they had received with letters which they had not understood due to the language barrier.

“I’m happy. I get a place to be, and I get people around me to help me with my letters and find a solution to my housing problem.” Seb, male young refugee, 21, London

Several young refugees said that they would go to Centrepont staff for emotional as well as practical support. Some also said that they received a lot of support from other young people at their service who they could talk to about their worries and fears. One young woman went so far as saying that this support made Centrepont feel like a family.

“Since I came here to Centrepont I feel like they’re part of my family...They are open, especially staff, encourage me to talk to them. They support me whenever I need to talk.” Mariam, female young refugee, 20, London

The female refugees were more likely than their male counterparts to say they rely on staff for their emotional needs, with many male young refugees saying that they do not speak to anyone when they are upset. Some, of both sexes, also appeared to feel a cultural barrier in asking for help, and said that they did not want to be a burden on the staff.

“I don’t like asking too much. If I ask once and it’s inconvenient I don’t like to ask again.” Fana, female young refugee, 21, London

When asked how the support they receive from Centrepont differs from the support they received from their family back in their country of origin, all agreed that there were fundamental

differences. They agreed that Centrepont staff can perform many of the roles that their family used to, such as giving advice and emotional support, but felt they can never really replace the support they got from their family due to the love and closeness they felt for their family. Although some felt a strong emotional connection to their key workers, most felt such an attachment was not possible or sensible as they knew that staff were just doing their job, and were aware they were likely to move on again fairly soon.

Some also felt that they were fundamentally less able to fulfil their needs. One young person remarked that her real family understood her needs automatically, whereas it is much harder in the UK as she needs to explain to people, which is made even harder by the language barrier. Some also felt that they now lack the moral guidance they had back with their family as their parents used to tell them what is right and wrong.

When asked what else Centrepont could provide to better meet their needs, there were three key issues: more help with their language, more help with understanding ‘how things work’ in the UK and finding them permanent housing.

Several young refugees said that they would benefit from more informal help with their English, by having someone to practise speaking English with to supplement their ESOL classes. Without the support of friends or family, many felt they simply did not practise their language skills often enough. One young refugee said that a volunteer had helped him with his English and taught details about the English system, such as

how Parliament works. He said that he found this very interesting and useful and would like more sessions like this.

This ties into the second key area where refugees felt they could be more supported. Being so far from their families, several felt lost in the system and wished that they had had more help in learning how things work in the UK, both in terms of culture, and what they are entitled to and where to go for help.

The most commonly cited concern of young refugees interviewed was finding stable accommodation. Many felt that they could not progress in other areas of their lives, such as going to college or making friends until they found somewhere permanent to live. Refugees appeared to view the lack of a permanent home as more of a barrier to their general development than other young people. This could perhaps be because they felt the need for an anchor to build their lives around and help them feel more settled, a feeling which other young people may receive through friends and family.

"I wish I had my own housing - little kitchen, little bathroom, all my own." Genet, female young refugee, 21, London

5. Reconciling with their families

5.1 Do young people want to improve their family relationships?

Over a third of young people (36%) said that they would like to improve their relationship with their families, but another third (34%) said that were not interested in improving the relationship. Just under a third (30%) said that they did not need to improve their family relationships, as they felt they were good already.

Those who had been with Centrepont or their service provider for less than 6 months (suggesting they had become homeless/left home more recently) were much more likely than those who had been at Centrepont over 6 months to say they were not interested in improving their relationship with their families (40% compared to 21%). Those who had been at Centrepont over 6 months were more likely to say they wanted to improve their relationship (49% compared to 30%).

This confirms a trend which was suggested by a number of staff members that young people become more willing to address issues with their families after they have been out of the family home for a longer period. They suggested that when they first arrive, many young people are still too angry and hurt about having to leave home and are not yet ready to tackle the difficulties with their family members. However, after they have been in the service for a few months, had time to get some perspective on what happened and begun to face the challenges of living independently, they gradually become more willing to address their family problems.

Only three young people interviewed (5%) said that they would like to move back in with their parents now¹⁰ (except young refugees for whom it was not possible), and those that did want to move back in only wanted to do so if things would be better. Most young people felt that they had already made such progress and gained so much independence that it would feel like a step backwards to move back in with their family.

"I have made so much for myself now. I don't want to fall back into the same cycle." Liam, male, 18, London

A number of young people said that they were happy with their relationship with their family and that nothing needing 'fixing'. They felt that their relationship was good and that their family was there for them when they need them. Many noted that their relationships with their families had improved a lot since moving out and having their own space had been really good for them. They were therefore not interested in moving back in or seeing their families more often as they feared it may risk the progress they had already made.

"In a way I prefer it how it is in case I go back to mum's and it goes back to how it used to be... I'd rather stay away from mum just so we can get on well with each other." James, male, 20, Out-of-London

"I just know for a fact that within a month of moving back, it would be back how it was." Mark, male, 18, Out-of-London

10. These three young people said the reason they could not return was because their parents would not let them come home.

Others said that they were not interested in increasing contact with their families, as they felt too betrayed or that their parents were so selfish, stubborn or uncaring that things would never be any better, so they preferred to keep their distance. For some this anger was directed at their entire family, but for some it was just associated with particular family members.

“The family that I am in touch with now, we’re close. I’m happy with what I’ve got right now. My other family, they’re just problem makers. I can’t deal with that right now in my life.” Ella, female, 18, London

“I just want to speak to my brothers. They’re the only ones who have been there for me. Sod the rest of them.” Sarah, young mother, 20, Out-of-London

A few individuals felt that they could not improve their relationships with their families whilst their positions were still so uncertain or while they were still engaged in destructive behaviour.

“It’s going to take a lot for me to build my relationship up with my family. They wouldn’t be happy with the way I live my life at the moment. That’s why I’m a bit embarrassed to see them because I’m not in the right frame of mind. If I was to see my mum I’d probably just cry my eyes out and walk away.” Kate, female, 21, Out-of- London

5.2 Tracing service for young refugees

All but one of the refugees interviewed were desperate to have more contact with their families, but for most this was not possible. Many spoke of how much they missed them and worried about their safety. Most had had no contact with their families after leaving their country of origin and did not know if they were dead or alive. One young woman had had no contact with her family except for a message which her family had managed to get to her to tell her that her brother had been killed.

A number had tried to trace their families through the Red Cross tracing service. These young people praised the efforts of Red Cross, saying that they had been very kind to them, but none had been able to find their family members through the service.

Some young refugees said that they had not made any attempts to contact their families as they feared that it would put their family in danger. For many, it was illegal for them to leave their country, and therefore did not want to risk the authorities finding out they had left or their families may be persecuted.

5.3 Mediation

The Homelessness Act 2002 required local authorities to take a strategic approach to tackling homelessness, including developing plans to prevent it. Mediation and family reconciliation is regarded as a key tool to achieve this outcome, particularly in responding to homelessness applications from young people.

The goal of family mediation services is to help young people and their families to find solutions to their disputes. Both parties explain their concerns and needs to each other in the presence of a qualified and impartial family mediator. Sometimes the mediator will make suggestions of how to solve a problem, but they will never instruct either party. Their role is primarily to help each side see things from the other's point of view and facilitate a mutually agreed course of action.

When asked if they felt mediation would have been useful for them, half (50%) did not think it would have been useful, but a third (32%) thought it would have been useful for them when they were younger, and one in seven (14%) thought it would be useful for them now. The fact that many more thought it would have been useful for them when younger rather than now suggests that the point of intervention of these services is critical. The interviews suggested that this importance of early intervention was not so much about getting to a young person at an earlier age, but at an earlier point in their breakdown of relationship with their family.

Some young people in the interviews were very positive about mediation and felt it might help bring them and their family together. There was, however, a strong feeling that a family has to be ready to try it and it would not work if it was forced upon them.

"You have to want to do it. If you don't want to do it you can't do anything." Jason, young father, 23, London

The qualitative interviews provided insight into why many young people were hesitant about the idea of mediation. For many this related to their perspective on their personal circumstances rather than on the concept of mediation itself. A large number of young people acknowledged that mediation was a good service in principle, but that it would not work for them as their families were too stubborn and would never change, and many thought their families would simply refuse to take part. Some also felt that there are fundamental differences in either personality or belief between them and their parents which could never be resolved.

"It could work for some people. But not everyone's family... my family it wouldn't go down with. My mum's quite a stubborn person...so it's a little bit hard to talk to her, so trying to get her to do a mediation thing, it ain't gonna happen." Alicia, female, 20, London

"It sounds good for other people. I think my family's a bit past it. I don't think it would help anything." Lisa, female, 17, London

Some young people felt that the concept of mediation was too intrusive, and thought that their parents would not approve of a stranger coming in to talk about their private issues. Some thought their parents may also see it as an admission that the family could not deal with their own problems and would therefore be offended if they suggested it.

"They may feel very embarrassed to have another person in their presence and will even feel that confidence is gone, trust is gone

because you're telling other people what is going on in your own household. When you're brought up that everything that happens in the house is supposed to be confidential, that can cause friction." Jason, young father, 23, London

"The only people who can make it better are yourselves... The only people who can sort it out are you and your family... it's your own mess. You've got to clean it up." Stacey, female, 17, Out-of-London

A few young people had tried family mediation before coming to their service provider. Young people outside of London were more likely to have been offered mediation than those in London. Most of those who had taken part in mediation were offered it after they made their homelessness application.

The majority of those interviewed who had tried mediation were not very positive about the service they had received. However, this feedback is unlikely to be representative of the wider population of young people who have used mediation services, as some of the young people interviewed were those who ended up homeless despite trying mediation. Therefore, these were the cases where mediation was unable to help them improve family relationships to the point where they could remain at home. If one looks at success rates of mediation more generally, the feedback is a lot more positive¹¹.

Many of the criticisms raised by the young people interviewed focused around the nature of the mediation they received rather than the concept of mediation itself. Some reported that their

mediation sessions had just dragged up painful issues without dealing with them, so they felt it had made things worse.

"There's no point, it makes it worse. When I was younger, [I tried mediation] and it doesn't work, it just made it worse... All the time, they just used dig and dig and dig for it, and I used to get really, really upset, all the time. [So it's best to just leave it.] It will sort itself out in the end." Nicole, female, 17, Out-of-London

"It just ended up making me and my mam worse... once we started going there, we didn't resolve problems, we ended up creating more problems." Mark, male, 18, Out-of-London

Others believed that their family issues were simply too serious to be resolved. Some felt that their parents had simply 'put on a show' at the mediation sessions and reverted to their previous, unhelpful behaviour once they were alone.

"It was a different story there and after. Everyone was acting like they're going to change, but they're not really. No-one could really be arsed, it was all just a bit of a show." Simon, male, 16, Out-of-London

"We had this little explaining thing, and it went nice that night. Everyone was in agreement and everyone seemed to be OK. But after they left, it was still the same. Everyone will go along while people are there, but when they're gone, it's just back to square one again." Damien, male, 18, London

11. Of the 205 young people who used Alone in London reconciliation services in 2005/6, 38% resolved conflict during stage 1; 27% were helped to find alternative safe accommodation; and 40% of the young people who went through the mediation process remained at/returned home. (Communities and Local Government, Tackling Youth Homelessness Policy Briefing 18, March 2007)

Feedback was certainly not all negative, and some did report that it had improved things. For example, some said that it helped them understand the problems a bit better and helped them coexist. It had just not helped reconcile them with their parents to the point where they could move back in.

“That helped us a lot. We could talk about the issues. You’ve got to listen to them but can’t get angry. You’re allowed to talk about it obviously, but you’re not allowed to take everything offensively.” Kirsty, young mother, 17, Out-of-London

Implications of research findings for mediation services

Many of the young people interviewed who had become homeless as a result of family breakdown either did not know where they could access family mediation services, or were not even aware such services existed. This was particularly true in London. This suggests that existing family mediation services should be better publicised to young people and families.

The hesitance to partake in mediation which many young people described in the interviews, suggests that care must be taken in the way that it is proposed to young people and their families. It is important that services are flexible enough to allow families to take part on their own terms. If they feel ownership over the process, more people may be willing to engage with mediation services.

Staff suggested that it is important that parents are not made to feel as if they have failed, so they must be made to feel as comfortable about the process as possible.

“I’ve set up a mediation before where the young person has been really, really willing to do it, but they got there and the parent hasn’t even turned up... and then the young person gets the wrong idea, thinking that it means they don’t want them to go home. But the parents are saying that they do. They just won’t come there to do the mediation.” Staff member, Out-of-London

Staff emphasised the importance of services picking up families before their problems get to the point where the relationships are beyond repair. They suggested that if young people were offered mediation at an earlier stage, they would be more likely to engage and resolve their differences. They highlighted the need for more training of frontline staff in all agencies working with young people to help them recognise the signs of problems at home. For example, one staff member suggested that if parents go to counselling, these services should ask if they have children and offer support to the children too to help them cope with problems happening at home, such as their parents’ divorce.

“A bit of mediation with someone at 16/17 is not going to fix the problem... Picking people up early is crucial. We had a guy who had drug taking parents his whole life and only when his mum throws him out at 16 after living in a crack house his whole life does anyone take

any notice. Actually social services should have been involved with that guy from birth—it's the ones who slip through the net."
Staff member, London

"Supported housing is very important and is needed for a lot of young people but then there's also quite a few young people here that maybe shouldn't have had to get to the point where they need this." **Staff member, Out-of-London**

Some staff members suggested that it may also be useful to help young people and their families to spend time together without discussing the issues which divide them. They argued that the most successful conversations often take place when families are not having in-depth talks as it takes the pressure off. For example, by spending time doing activities together, it may help families rebuild their relationships to the point where they are able to talk calmly about their conflict. One of the partner agencies is therefore hoping to get a small budget to take young people and their families on activity days together. This may help address the complaints raised by some young people that mediation just made things worse by dragging up painful issues, because it will allow them to improve their relationships without raising these issues directly.

Staff members argued that more support should be available for parents during family conflicts, particularly to help them cope when their children are engaging in risky or problem behaviour. A number praised the work being done with parents of young children as part of

the Sure Start programme, and felt that intensive support should also be available for parents of older children who are struggling. Staff did not feel that formalised parenting classes could be used in the same way as this may be interpreted as insulting and condescending. But one-to-one support for parents whose children are displaying rebellious behaviour may help them overcome the issues. They suggested that in-home work would be helpful as it may encourage parents to accept the support if it was discreet and on their own terms.

Staff also argued that there should be more recognition of the role that extended family can play, and that extended family should for example be involved in mediation sessions. A number of young people and staff noted that extended family can play an important role as mediators themselves, and so could make the process feel less impersonal.

Case study: Alone in London

Alone in London's family mediation service began in 1996 to help reduce and prevent family conflict, breakdown and ultimately homelessness. Their mediators facilitate constructive and improved communication between family members. Alone in London's service is a pioneer in best practice mediation¹² and is already adopting a number of activities which address the concerns raised by young people and staff.

Early intervention

Alone in London perform outreach work in youth centres, Connexions centres and sexual health clinics to pick up young people who are having problems with their families before the problems reach crisis point and the young person becomes homeless. They also work with the Youth Offending Team and social services to ensure that young people are referred at an earlier stage.

The team also runs education sessions in schools. Workshops for 11- 16 year olds are run as part of the PHSE syllabus. These focus on homelessness awareness; realities of leaving home; and conflict resolution (including anti-bullying and resolving family disputes).

Flexibility

The mediators offer to conduct sessions wherever the young people and their families wish to have them. They encourage them to use a neutral space, such as their offices, but will do home visits if that is what is desired by the two parties. There is no fixed timeframe of support. The mediation process will continue for as long as is required, with six to twelve month follow up support.

Support for parents

Alongside group mediation work, the mediators provide one-to-one support for both the young person and their parents. This gives staff an

opportunity to support parents with any other issues which may be impacting their own well-being and therefore their relationship with their child. Alone in London also welcomes extended family members who wish to take part in the process.

Follow up sessions

In order to prevent young people being left upset by family mediation sessions, Alone in London mediators are encouraged to have a 'debrief' with the young person afterwards to highlight the progress made and make sure they have recovered emotionally from the discussion. This therapeutic element will increase the chance of young people being able to deal with their family difficulties in the long-term. As part of the group session, families are also taught processes by which to deal with their disputes which they can use to address future conflicts which may arise.

Anonymity

Alone in London has a strict confidentiality policy, whereby it will not share any information with other agencies working with a young person without the permission of the young person. This helps build up trust with the family and young person.

Reconciliation as an end in itself

Alone in London's philosophy is that mediation should not prescribe what is or is not a success¹³. Success can therefore not be narrowly defined in terms of whether a young person goes home. The service works towards the looser aim of improving communication between the parties, and has worked with its funders to reach agreements that working towards set outcomes is not useful.

12. In May 2006 Alone in London compiled a Good Practice Guide for Mediating with Young People and their Families.

13. Good Practice Guide for Mediating with Young People and their Families (2007, Alone in London)

5.4 Respite

Respite services provide accommodation for young people for a fixed period (typically around six weeks) when they are facing relationship breakdown with their families. The aim is to give the young person and their family some space and provide an opportunity for them to resolve their differences in a less pressurised environment. The idea is that the relationship will be rebuilt to the point where the young person is able and willing to move back home. Respite services are generally coupled with longer-term mediation services to help families achieve and sustain this goal.

The quantitative questionnaire revealed that young people have some reservations about the idea of respite. Only a third (32%) said that it would have been useful for them, with nearly two thirds (63%) saying it would not have been useful (a further 5% did not respond to this question).

However, the qualitative interviews suggested that this hesitation may have been due to a misconception that respite services would act as an alternative to services such as mediation, rather than in conjunction. The main objection to respite cited in the interviews, was that using respite services seemed like running away from the problems, rather than dealing with them. In the interviews, when there was more time to explain that most established respite services are linked to other sources of support, young people were more positive about the idea.

After respite had been explained in more depth, young people were generally more positive

about the idea of respite care than of mediation in isolation. They recognised that having your own space can often help deal with problems. A number had done this informally, by staying with friends or extended family for a few days until both them and their parents calmed down and were ready to forgive each other. Young people generally felt that about a week away, maybe two would be sufficient.

"I went to my uncle and aunt's and they were like my outlet. It was like my resting time, to get myself together mentally.... Just to keep myself on a level, really." Liam, male, 18, London

However, there was far from universal support for it. Some felt that it would simply delay the inevitable as it would not fundamentally change things, and problems would just reoccur as soon as they got back. Moving out permanently was seen as a better option by some so that the young person can become more independent and get their own space.

"If I have a fight with my sister, and then people take me away for three weeks just so I can come back, I guarantee 100% it's going to happen again when I go back. So, just having my own space is much better... when I go to see my family and talk to them I know I can still come back to my place - that helps a lot." Carlos, male, 19, London

"Whenever things got bad I would just go over to my nan's... With the arguing it did help quite a bit, but the actual issues what were causing the arguments never got solved." Stuart, 20, Out-of-London

A few also felt that respite might be difficult to cope with if the choice to do it came from the parents rather than the young person themselves. One young woman felt that it would 'mess you about' as she would not know if her family wanted her back or not and thought it would just end up upsetting her.

"That would just mess you up that. One minute you're staying at your mum's house, the next minute you're staying in a hostel. That's just stupid that. It would just mess you up. It makes you think that your mam wants you sometimes but not all the time." Nicole, female, 17, Out-of-London

Implications of research findings for respite services

None of the staff interviewed were aware of dedicated respite services for young people at risk of estrangement from their families in their area. All however, were aware of at least one mediation service, suggesting that respite services are much less widespread at present. Nightstop services¹⁴ are an important source of short-term emergency accommodation available in communities throughout the UK, but the focus of these services is to find a young person a safe place to sleep for up to 3 nights when they risk sleeping on the streets. There are few dedicated respite services which are aimed at resolving family disputes before they reach crisis point.

Many staff members were extremely positive about the idea of respite services, with a number wishing that they had resources to run a service using the respite model themselves. Staff noted that a break away from each other can often be

important to help families pinpoint the issues which are causing the conflict and build up a relationship with a service provider.

"The local authority try and do mediation first before they accept them as homeless, but I think you need a period of a break first to find out what the issues are, because in your 20 min homeless presentation you are not bearing your soul... they have to have a trusting relationship with you first." Staff member, Out-of-London

One of the partner agencies involved in the research said that they had started to see a pattern of their services being used almost as respite care. There have been an increasing number of abandonments from their services after about a week when staff later found out that the young person had returned home. While this of course a positive outcome for the young person, it leads to a waste of resources for the provider as it leads to a great deal of paper work and a gap in the use of the room. These experiences therefore suggest that designated respite services would be useful to help the young people using services in this way. The agency did not report seeing the same young people coming back over and over, suggesting that a short respite break can be effective in addressing a young person's conflict with their family.

Staff stressed that it is important that respite services are provided in a relaxed and welcoming atmosphere to increase the chances of families properly engaging with the process. Staff felt that respite could be a great opportunity to work

14. See www.depaulnightstopuk.org/content/depaul-nightstop-uk-home for more information.

intensively with the young person and their family to really tackle the root issues. Some felt that traditional homelessness services are not in a position to push too far into family circumstances as it may risk alienating the young person whose welfare is their primary concern. But they felt that a short-stay service would have more freedom to tackle these issues.

When asked how long respite services should be available for, opinions differed quite widely. A number of young people thought that only a short period away would be necessary to help you cool off.

“It wouldn’t have taken long. If you’re arguing about silly things, you get over it pretty quick once you’ve calmed down.” Jess, young mother, 22, Out-of-London

However, a number of the staff who were interviewed felt that respite services should be longer-term in order to provide an opportunity to work with the young person and their family more intensively. A period of at least a month was felt to be necessary for the difficulties of independent living to sink in and for the problems with their family to be explored.

“In a week you don’t really learn any lessons in life do you? You just think it’s a break.” Staff member, Out-of-London

“I would love to have a direct access assessment unit for 4 weeks... and have the trained mediator in there to work out if this is salvageable, and in that period of the time work with the whole family to improve things long-term.” Staff member, Out-of-London

6. Having children of their own

6.1 How they feel about being a parent

Nearly all the young parents interviewed were in contact with their child and went to visit them regularly. Only one, a young father, wished that he saw his child more, but felt that it was his housing situation which was the real barrier to him seeing his child, rather than will on the part of him or the child's mother. All young parents living in services (hostels) were looking forward to getting their own place where they could have their child to stay over/live with them, as this was seen by all as a barrier to them having a closer relationship with their child at present.

All young mums and dads interviewed said that they enjoyed being a parent, and valued seeing their children grow and develop. A number also said that they valued the unconditional love which they gave and received from their child.

"I love being a parent. It's hard and everything but I still love being a parent - just watching them grow in front of you." Sarah, young mother, 20, Out-of-London

"I think it's amazing. First thing in the morning when you wake up, when he sees you he just gives you the biggest smile. Instead of waking up in a bad mood, it puts you in a good mood for the rest of the day." James, young father, 20, Out-of-London

Only one of the young parents interviewed planned to have children when they did, and a number said they wished they had been older

when they had kids. A number also wished that they had waited until they were in a more stable relationship. None, however, regretted going through with the pregnancy due to the love they held for their children.

"I wouldn't go back on it, but I would have waited. I wish I'd have waited. But if I'd waited I wouldn't have the daughter that I have would I?" Kerry, young mother, 16, Out-of-London

"I always wanted kids but I couldn't say they were planned... But I love being a mum. They keep me going. They're the ones that keep me strong. If all else fails, if my family breaks up, whatever gets me down. They're guaranteed to keep me on my toes and make me smile any part of the day, whatever's wrong with me." Young mum, 22, Out-of-London

The hardest part of being a parent was seen to be dealing with the tiring nature of caring for them day-to-day. One young mum noted that she never had time to sit down and relax, and felt like she was always on the go. Despite this, a number of the young mums said that they did not like leaving their children, even with trusted family members, as they did not like being away from them.

"The responsibility is pretty hard - having to look after her and look after myself at 16 years old. I can't go out with my mates like I used to. It's hard to get a babysitter when all my mates are 15/16/17 and most of them have got jobs or they're wanting to go out... There are times when it's a struggle." Kerry, young mum, 16, Out-of-London

“You’re always on the go. You can’t just sit down and do what you want. There’s always something to do, and it can get quite boring doing the same thing every day.” Jess, young mum, 22, Out-of-London

When asked whether having children had affected them as a person, young mums were more likely to say that it had radically changed them straight away. Dads did feel that it changed them but not in such an immediate way. Both mums and dads felt that the main way in which they had changed was that having a child forced them to become more responsible.

“[It didn’t change me] at first, it’s not until later. That’s to do with maturity. When you’re young you only think about yourself... I didn’t change much until later on. You start to be like I’m being a bad daddy. And my dad was bad to me - how must my child feel? And then you’re like I need to change, I need to fix up.” Jason, young father, 23, London

“I had to grow up in the space of 3 months. I had to click my fingers and say ‘Get it in your head. You’re a mum now.’” Kerry, young mum, 16, Out-of-London

When the young fathers were asked what they think it is to be a good father, most felt that the main thing was to be there. Many had had absent fathers themselves and were therefore determined to be involved in their child’s life. All young parents generally agreed that being a good parent was about being caring, always being there for your children and encouraging them to do well.

6.2 Their relationship with their child’s other parent

Only a small minority of the young parents interviewed were still in a relationship with their child’s other parent, and all of these were living in semi-independent accommodation with their partner and child.

Of those who were not together, all still had some contact with the other parent, but with varying degrees of civility. A couple of young mothers were engaged in custody battles as the father was threatening to try and take the child away. In these cases, the mothers seemed to be torn between wanting their children to have a father and wanting them to grow up in a stable and loving atmosphere. Some of the young mothers said that they only wanted the father to be involved if they were going to be a stable and positive influence on the child.

“He comes in and out of [my daughter’s] life and it’s me that has to deal with it after... If he were involved, I want it on a regular basis, not once every two months or something. I’ve never, ever stopped him from being her dad because it’s not fair on her, and she’s the main priority isn’t she, not me, not [her father]. Stuff the arguments, using her in the middle of it, it’s not fair on her.” Kerry, young mum, 16, Out-of-London

“We try and be civil with each other for the sake of [our daughter]. But he just keeps saying ridiculous things to me like he’s going to take [her daughter] off me... He’s good with her when he wants to be but I think he’s

more bothered about his friends. I think he needs to grow up." Kirsty, young mum, 17, Out-of-London

Others had strained but functional relationships where they were able to be civil with one another to organise visits with the child. A few young parents found that their relationships had improved over time as they managed to put their differences aside for the sake of their child. One father spoke of how his relationship with the mother had been very strained at first, but that over time things had improved to a point where they could coexist.

"With me and his dad, it's wasn't a good relationship, but we're putting that aside and we're putting our son first. We're going to have a good relationship for our son." Michelle, young mum, 21, London

"It's not bad now. Before it was very bitter, angry... We were angry people. But it's better now." Jason, young father, 23, London

6.3 Whether having children has affected relationship with their family

A number of young mothers noted that having a child had improved her relationship with her own mother (this was less true for young fathers). Many described how their mums wanted to help out with the baby, and that caring for the child had given them something to bond over. A number said that their parents were disappointed when they first got pregnant as they were so young, but that they had come around and were now really supportive.

"With me being so young, I don't think she wanted that for me. But she's always been there for us both and she loves [her grandson] to bits." Jess, young mum, 22, Out-of-London

Some said that having a child of their own had also helped them to see past conflicts from their mother's point of view, as they now had a better understanding of the pressures of being a parent.

"I understand what I put them through, and I've not even got to the teenage bits yet!" Lauren, young mum, 22, Out-of-London

A number also said that it had improved their relationship with their siblings and extended family, particularly those who had their own children, as it gave them a reason to meet up more. Many therefore felt they could rely on siblings or grandparents for help with babysitting and advice on parenting.

A number of young people, even those who were not yet parents, said they were determined to be better to their children than their parents were to them.

A key part of this was that they vowed to never abandon them. All the young parents interviewed said that they were determined to put the effort in and do their best to be a good parent. Particularly those who had suffered physical abuse appeared to see having their own children as a second chance at having a stable and happy family life.

"I just don't hit my son. When he's naughty I tell him off and send him into a corner. I'm not like my dad I don't hit people." Michelle, young mum, 21, London

7. Policy recommendations

The research findings have a number of important implications for service provision and policy at both central and local government level. Although the recent investment in family mediation and other family intervention projects has had positive effects, the continuing link between family breakdown and youth homelessness shows that more must be done to improve access to these services, and ensure they are set up in a way which is appropriate for young people at risk of homelessness. The research suggests that intervening when disputes within families are at their early stages is crucial if relationships are to be successfully rebuilt.

Early intervention

More early intervention projects should be introduced to reach families in crisis before their disputes get to the point where the relationships are beyond repair. This is underlined by the fact that only a small number of young people were interested in moving back home by the time they had accessed homelessness services.

- Staff in all agencies working with young people (including schools, GPs and youth services) should be trained to recognise the signs of problems at home, such as growing increasingly withdrawn or agitated.
- Young people should be educated at school about the realities of homelessness to dispel unrealistic expectations of what housing assistance is available for young people who

leave home. This may encourage young people to work harder on their relationships with their families. This should be linked with education about what services are available to support young people, and could be delivered by formerly homeless young people themselves, as is the case with the Centrepont Youth Educators' Programme (see section 8 for more details).

- Families who are experiencing difficulties should also be given guidance on the services available to them, for example at counselling services for parents going through a divorce.
- Funding should be made available for greater provision of therapeutic counselling in both statutory and specialist voluntary services¹⁵ to help teach young people the skills they need to communicate more effectively and resolve disputes with their families. Centrepont's health team offers a range of therapeutic therapies to the young people we support (see section 8 for more details)
- DCSF should consider placing a stronger emphasis on communication skills and how to resolve disputes in the PSHE curriculum.

Improving access to and quality of family mediation services

As so many young people reported that their family relationships improved after they moved out, mediation and other reconciliation services should take into account that building close knit family ties does not always involve living under

15. Centrepont's health team offers a range of therapeutic therapies to the young people we support (see section 8 for more details)

the same roof. Family can play a crucial role in providing support even if the members are not bound by bricks and mortar.

- Mediation services should therefore not be linked solely to the homelessness assessment process. Mediation should have broader aims than simply to facilitate a return home. Improving family relationships can be extremely valuable to young people's achievement of positive outcomes, even if returning home is not achieved. Helping young people rebuild any level of contact should therefore be seen as an end in itself. Funders of mediation should acknowledge the value of these softer outcomes, and local authority funded mediation services should take on a broader remit and not operate solely to encourage those presenting as homeless to return home.
- Mediation services should be better advertised to families and young people through services they already use, such as GPs and youth centres. Creating a better understanding of the support mediation services can provide may help to dispel the scepticism towards mediation which many young people and their families seem to hold. All organisations working with young people should build closer links with mediation providers to make it easier for young people and families to access these services. Given that young people may be experiencing periods of crisis, signposting services may not be enough so a referral system may help to increase the numbers accessing mediation services.
- In order to deal with the additional demand which these improved referral systems will likely create, DCSF and CLG will need to invest more in these services to increase total provision. It is important that services are available as and when families are willing to engage with them or the window of opportunity for resolving their differences may be lost.
- It is important that sessions are offered at times which suit the family, and in places they feel comfortable, including in-home sessions if appropriate.
- Mediation staff must be given sufficient training in how to interact with young people effectively. Speaking to young people in a way that makes them feel comfortable will increase the chances of them effectively engaging with the process.
- It is crucial that family mediation is not done in isolation. It must be part of a wider package of support to help prevent families rejecting it as meddling, and encourage them to genuinely engage with the process.
- Mediation services should consider, where appropriate, involving extended family in group sessions. They can often act as informal mediators, and it may be possible to rebuild these relationships even if the young person cannot reconcile with their parents.

Greater provision of comprehensive respite services

Central and local government should consider commissioning dedicated respite services throughout the country to give young people some temporary breathing space to help them resolve their differences with their families. Respite centres are only available in certain areas at present, but staff in all areas recognised the need for such services.

- Respite services should be provided in a relaxed and welcoming atmosphere to increase the chances of families properly engaging with the process.
- Length of stay should be flexible, but it should be available for up to two months to give the young person long enough to understand the realities of independent living, and give them and their family a sufficient period of time to properly address their differences.

More support for parents and extended family

More support should be available for parents during family conflicts.

- This support should be very flexible, and could perhaps take the form of in-home support sessions so it is discreet and therefore less intimidating for parents. Formalised parenting classes are unlikely to be successful as they would likely be interpreted as insulting and condescending.

- Government and voluntary agencies should consider establishing parent peer support services (such as that used by Home Start¹⁶) to help parents of teenagers and young adults.
- The Government should also consider making it easier for extended family members to foster young people who become estranged from their parents. This needs to be coupled with financial support as staff have seen examples of aunts or grandparents willing to take a young person in but who cannot due to a lack of space or financial resources.

More support for young parents, particularly young fathers

There should be more centres available where young parents, particularly young fathers, can go to spend time together in a safe environment.

- This will make it easier for young parents living in a hostel to play a part in their children's lives. For example, there should be spaces available in children's centres where parents can go to play with their children.
- There should be better advertising of existing services, and a greater number should be aimed at young fathers, as most fathers interviewed were not aware of services available to them.

Greater support for young refugees

It is not possible for most young refugees to reunite with their families, so the focus should be on supporting them to build a new life for themselves, and developing new support networks.

¹⁶. Home Start offers support from volunteers, most of whom are parents themselves, to families who have at least one child under five. See www.home-start.org.uk for more details.

- Peer mentoring and education schemes should be developed so young refugees who are more settled can advise others and encourage them to make friends and access support.
- Given that finding secure accommodation appears to be even more important for the mental well-being of refugees than other young people, the Homes and Communities Agency and local authorities should work together to increase the provision of move-on accommodation for this group, as well as homeless young people as a whole

8. Centrepont services – tackling the causes and effects of youth homelessness

Centrepont's Youth Educators Project

The Youth Educators Project is a key strategic programme through which Centrepont works to prevent youth homelessness. Young people design a youth homelessness workshop drawing on their own experiences which they then deliver in schools to other young people who may be at risk of homelessness. Youth Educators receive formal, accredited qualifications to quantify their achievements. The chance to impart their knowledge and experience to other young people improves the Youth Educators' skills, experience, confidence and motivation, as well as helping the young people who attend their session become better informed. The project has received very positive feedback from young people who attended the sessions, saying that it helped them gain a better understanding of what it was really like to be homeless and where they could go for help.

Centrepont learning team

Centrepont's learning team runs a programme of accredited learning called Life Wise. This is a series of 20 life skills workshops that tackle the wide range of skills needs that homeless young people need to live independently. The whole programme is accredited by the Assessment & Qualifications Alliance (AQA), and includes workshops which help young people to manage their emotions, such as 'Understanding your emotions', 'Anger management', 'Coping with change'. Not only

does this encourage young people to engage in accredited training, but helps build their confidence and communication skills which help them cope better with disputes and stress.

Centrepont health team

Centrepont has a number of qualified mental health therapists who use a range of therapeutic approaches including integrative, cognitive behavioural therapy, analytical, psychodynamic and drama therapy. These therapists provide specialist mental health support to help homeless young people tackle their mental and emotional health needs. At a basic level, this can mean providing counselling to help young people come to terms with their circumstances and work towards building confidence, motivation and self-esteem. At a more complex level, it can mean working intensively to control and contain existing mental health conditions. In 2008/9, the health team worked with 1053 young people¹⁷, to whom they provided 1938 one-to-one therapy sessions and 255 group therapy sessions. This support helps young people in all areas of their lives as it helps them develop greater resilience so they can deal with difficult situations without losing control. It also teaches young people to communicate more effectively, both in terms of controlling aggression and feeling comfortable to ask for help from others. This makes it easier for them to access services they need, and also helps them to develop closer personal relationships with friends and family.

17. Out of a total of 1798 which Centrepont worked with in 2008/9.



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The names of some young people have
been changed to protect their privacy.

