



Relate NI

SUSTAINING HEALTHY RELATIONSHIPS

Briefing Paper

**Care Experienced Children & Young
People**

Introduction

In March 2022 Relate NI Commissioned Ulster University to carry out evidence based research on healthy relationships and their importance to a range of areas to provide recommendations for improved public policy commissioning. This briefing paper is a summary of the findings relevant to those working in the fields of care experienced children and young people. The full research report with it's 20 recommendations are available on request.

Why are Relationships Important?

Relate NI is passionate about enabling good quality relationships. Through our 75 years' experience of working with people throughout Northern Ireland, we've come to understand that relationships not only give our lives meaning, they are of vital importance to our wellbeing. This project adds further research and evidence to why good quality relationships matter. Evidence indicates that good quality relationships are a crucial protective factor which can prevent propensity towards substance misuse; shield us from the effects of long term health conditions; aid our recovery, and can even prevent illness in the first place. Conversely, poor quality relationships are risk factors for poor health and wellbeing. Not only do people in poor quality relationships have worse health than those in happier ones, but poor quality relationships are also worse for our health than none: unhappily married people are at greater risk of poor health than divorced people.

Put simply, good quality relationships:

- Are a foundation to our health and wellbeing: Evidence demonstrates that people who have good quality relationships have lower blood pressure than those in poorer quality relationships; close couple relationships can slow the rate of decline in people with dementia and even delay admission to hospital or care homes. Relationship distress is linked to anxiety and depression.
- Are important for children's life chances: Evidence indicates that children growing up with parents who have low parental conflict, whether together or separated, enjoy better physical and mental health; better emotional wellbeing; higher educational attainment and a lower likelihood of engaging in risky behaviours.

Context

Across the life course, our experiences in pre-natal and perinatal life, infancy, childhood, adolescence, adulthood, and old age are shaped by the

quality and nature of our relationships with others¹. This idea is the basis of attachment theory², an integral component to many mental health interventions. Further, research³ on environmental systems, indicates that the quality of relationships in one system of life (e.g. the family) will influence and be influenced by the quality of relationships on other systems (e.g. school, the workplace).

Thus, our experiences of relationships directly influence our quality of life, wellbeing, and also our capacity to fulfil our potential and be more productive in education, employment and other domains⁴. Developing and sustaining healthy relationships is integral to the functioning of all social systems in which we live, including but not limited to, families and communities, education, health and social care, employment, and criminal justice. Therefore, developing and sustaining healthy relationships in all spheres of life is critical to the prosperity of everyone in society⁵

While the role of healthy relationships is understood by many, particularly those working directly to promote them, and to prevent and intervene on relationship-based crises, the fundamental role of relationships is not explicitly identified in public policy, which in turn affects commissioning priorities.

The Ulster University project team undertook research to demonstrate the core role of relationships in promoting wellbeing and life chances for everyone in society, which could be used to influence and inform public policy to specifically embed the role of relationships as protective and risk factors for meeting public policy objectives. The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted further the importance of relationships, and both their positive and negative impacts on families, communities, and services⁶.

The timing of this project is particularly pertinent given the Mental Health Strategy 2021-2031⁷, the COVID-19 context, and the recent local elections and NI Executive Programme for Government to be implemented, making this an opportune moment to intervene and influence policy to define and integrate relationship-based interventions into public policy actions.

Findings: The Key themes of the overall project

¹ Boyd and Bee, 2014; Waddell, 2019

² Bowlby, 1988; Ainsworth, 1972

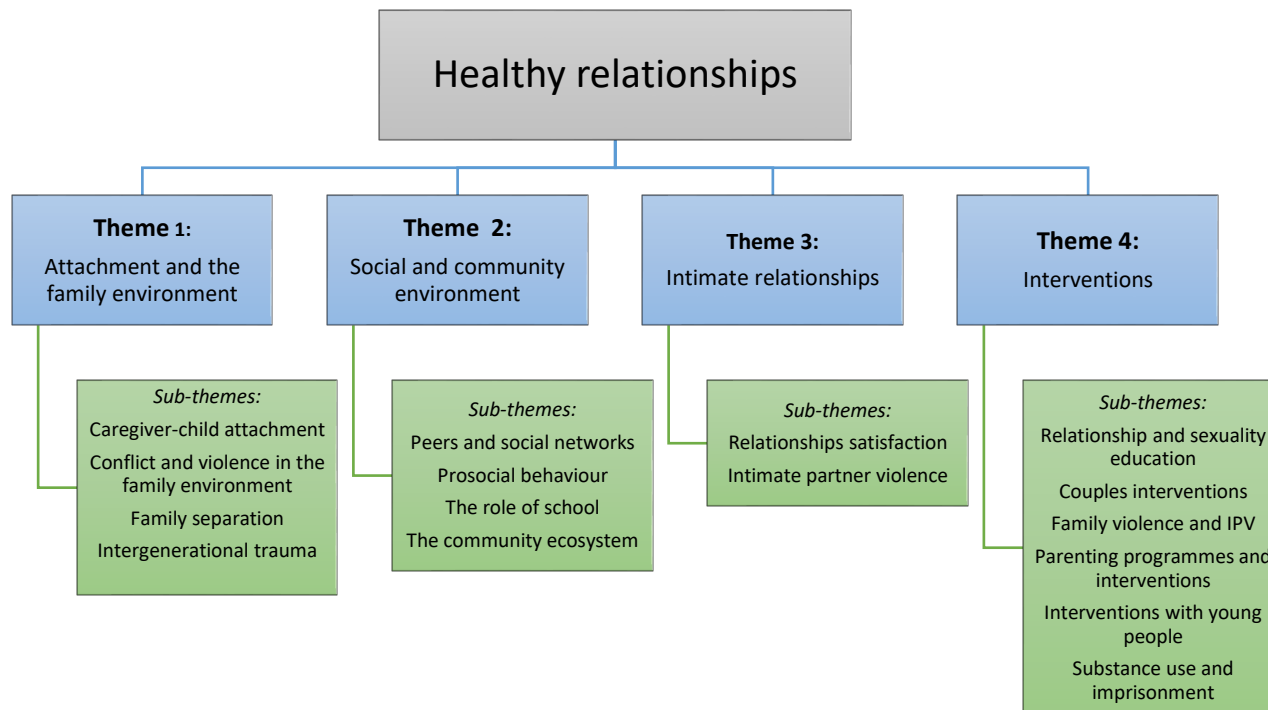
³ Bronfenbrenner (1995)

⁴ Beckett and Taylor, 2019; Waddell, 2019

⁵ Dimmock et al. 2022; Hawkins, et al., 2022

⁶ Goldstein and Flicker, 2021

⁷Department of Health, 2021



Themes relevant to this briefing paper

Care Experienced Children & Young People

Relationships within the family can become disrupted for many reasons, including parental separation or divorce, imprisonment, or the removal of children from parental care by government services due to maltreatment.

A report by the Department of Health ‘children social care statistics for Northern Ireland 2020/21’ states that there were 32,070 children referred to social services with 2298 children listed on the Action register predominantly due to neglect and physical abuse. 3530 children and young people are in care, the highest number recorded since the introduction care orders in 1995. Children experience trauma when removed from their family environment and placed in alternative care. Qualitative research from the USA⁸ indicates that the focus of support should be on helping children to achieve relational permanency over legal permanency. The research also recommends that foster care programme models are built on concepts of normalcy, which means young people can build strong relationships with individuals in their social network, engage in age-appropriate activities with peers, extracurricular activities, and work experience, which supports development and practice of agency. Findings show that young people who experienced genuine support and connection while growing up in foster or adoptive homes also described being emotionally connected and experiencing more meaningful, stable and supportive relationships in adulthood. In 2017, Studies⁹ with children who have severe and pervasive mental health challenges and who are also in care, advocate promoting the salience of strengthening emotional connections with family and supports followed by planning for physical permanency, which avoids traumatic and repeated cycles of care placements.

Using ecological systems theory¹⁰ research reported that children and adolescents from lower socio-economic backgrounds tend to have more difficult psychosocial adjustments across ecological domains, as they encounter increased risk factors, such as economic stress, chaotic home environments and violence in their communities. Ecological systems approaches are critical for children who are in the alternative care system, as much research¹¹ indicates that the importance of forming deeper social connections in the wider community and education as well as with employment support. Research¹² has also identified specific populations as having increased vulnerability to IPV (intimate Partner Violence) involvement throughout the life-course such as those involved in foster care.

Parenting programmes and interventions

A common approach for promoting healthy relationships is the provision of parenting interventions and there is evidence that parenting programmes that address healthy parent-child relationships,¹³ and that strengthen the inter-parental couple’s relationship¹⁴ have efficacy and

⁸ Ball et al. 2021

⁹ Boel-Studt and Landsman (2017)

¹⁰ Bronfenbrenner 1986, Yao & Enright 2022

¹¹ Cudjoe et al. 2022

¹² Astin and Smith, 2021

¹³ Chung et al. 2021; Li et al. 2016

¹⁴ Casey et al. 2017

important outcomes for children's mental health. A UK trial of a US version of a parenting intervention programme for couples at-risk or from low-income families reported improvement on almost every index of family functioning assessed, findings which were consistent with three RCTs of this programme in the USA. This intervention addresses family wide issues, couple's relationship, parenting, and the psychological wellbeing of parents and children has found promising results. Other evidence from an RCT of high-risk urban dwelling parents found that improvements in parental depression and social isolation can reduce the risk factors for child maltreatment.¹⁵ To prevent maltreatment, the research recommends community-based home visiting programmes as part of a comprehensive early childhood system that reaches families as early as possible with the needed services that can accommodate children with special needs, respect the culture of the family and ensures a continuity of care from prenatal life to school entrance. Similarly, another study¹⁶ recommended early childhood family home visiting (FHV) as an evidence-based intervention for including fathers and promote healthy child development, preventing child abuse and neglect, and providing support and education to parents.

Interventions with young people

When working with young people there is evidence that attachment-based treatments (ABT) with adolescents are effective at supporting and improving caregiver-adolescent attachment, which can have positive effects on young people's well-being and family life¹⁷. Another approach recommended by researchers¹⁸ uses creative group work in the form of activities and games, to support the establishment of trusting and healthy relationships within themselves and with their peers. This approach can support identity development, strengthen social skills and provide a sense of achievement and community. Other research¹⁹ also recommends allowing adolescents the opportunity to practice communication skills through role play.

Young people in care represent a demographic that are vulnerable to multitude of health, social and economic risks, and there is evidence²⁰ that relationship-focused interventions are critical for children in adoptive and foster care placements, in the form of wrap around treatment. Training foster parents, kinship providers and adoptive parents to develop skills to support older youth with trauma, loss, and grief is advisable²¹, as is the

¹⁵ Silovsky et al. 2022

¹⁶ Burcher et al. (2021)

¹⁷ Kobak and Kerig, 2015

¹⁸ Vysniauskyte-Rimkiene and Matuleviciute (2016)

¹⁹ Clark et al. (2018)

²⁰ Ruff & Baron, 2012; Vaughan et al. 2016

²¹ Ball et al. 2021

use of multi-faceted support programmes that include judges, court managers, social workers, therapists, and mentors to build a network of support that lasts beyond exit from care. Interventions²² that emphasise healthy relationships to promote smooth transitions from care to young adulthood and the completion of higher education, which increases the likelihood of stable employment. Strengthening relational connections can increase well-being and physical permanency for young people in care and might be a more efficient and effective investment of resources producing longer term benefits²³. In addition, the same researchers recommend obtaining relational permanency as the new benchmark of a successful case outcome in care systems over legal permanency.

Providing young people with comprehensive Relationship & Sexuality Education, especially for those with intellectual disability, autism spectrum condition, developmental disabilities, or experiences with alternative care was viewed as a protective factor by researchers to improve quality of life as well as the opportunity to have safe and healthy relationships.

VOYPIC²⁴ Case Study

Care experienced Young People and Healthy Relationships

In the recent Ending Violence Against Women and Girls consultation, VOYPIC agreed that everyone in society should be well equipped and empowered to enjoy healthy, respectful relationships. We also asked that due consideration be given to children and young people with lived experience of care and those who support them in promoting healthy, respectful relationships. Some care experienced children and young people may have experienced violence, abuse and neglect. This trauma can result in difficulty engaging in positive, trustful relationships with others in society.

Investment in positive role models is key for children and young people with complex emotional and mental health needs. It is crucial that every stakeholder within the corporate family for looked after children takes a trauma informed approach and recognises and defines their roles and responsibilities as corporate parents in promoting healthy, respectful relationships.

²² Nho et al. 2017

²³ Boel-Studt & Landsman, 2017

²⁴ VOYPIC was created in 1993 by a group of young people in care and professionals, to promote the rights and voice of children in care and care leavers. We are the charity for children and young people with a lived experience of care in Northern Ireland. We want to ensure that all children and young people living in care throughout Northern Ireland are given the best care and protection, they feel safe, their rights are respected, and their views and experiences matter. We want young people leaving care to have robust support, quality housing and the resources and opportunities to follow their ambitions and live happy and fulfilling lives.

Exploring provision for standardised, age-appropriate Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) as part of the curriculum in all schools should be explored. This would play a crucial role in promoting healthy relationships including consent. Evidence based RSE in all schools could challenge stereotypes from a young age, ensuring all children and young people have the right knowledge and skills to have fulfilling and safe relationships throughout their lives.

In a focus group that responded to the consultation all young people agreed or strongly agreed with this outcome. One young person noted that, without adequate RSE, young people are likely to source alternative, less trustworthy, sources of information.

VOYPIC Support for Healthy Relationships

Young Women's Safety Project

The young women that are members of the VOYPIC Belfast peer support group, decided to do a social action project addressing women's safety, because of the rising amount of violence against women. They decided as a group that they wanted to create safety keychains like the ones you can buy online but create them with items that they felt were the most useful and ensure that they were free and made available to young women with care experience so they could carry them with them when they are out in public.

Some of the young women in the group felt it was important to share with their peers some of their own lived experiences relating to women's safety. This was a safe space for them to do so and the group were very comfortable with each other. But doing so helped the other young women increase their knowledge and helped the members understand that this can happen to anyone.

Outcomes:

- Through the "See Me Hear Me Project" funded by the National Lottery the group participated in a social action project
- The young women were given the opportunity to discuss with their peers' different topics relating to women's safety.
- The young women in the group had a better understanding of different aspects of women's safety.
- The group met with staff from Rape Crisis NI to learn about the organisation and share their opinions on sexual assault and rape on young women
- The group created 100 safety keychains to be passed on to young women with care experience.
- The group met with two police officers to share their opinions with them and ask questions all relating to women's safety.

- The group have raised awareness about women's safety through discussions with peers and adults and when passing on the safety kits.

Pizza Advice – Young Men's Social Action Project

As part of the "See Me Hear Me" project a group of our Young Men, aged 16-18 from the North Down and Ards area of the South Eastern Trust met weekly for 6 weeks to participate in a Social Action Project. A Social action is about people coming together to help improve their lives and solve the problems that are important to them and their communities.

The young men felt it was important for them to have the opportunity to discuss a number of issues with their peers, and wanted the group separate from the mixed gender group they were attending in VOYPIC, as it would allow them to speak freely and explore the issues and pressures faced by young men. They felt that a single gender group would allow them to talk more freely about healthy relationships, staying safe, consent etc.

These needs were identified included:

- Mental Health support
- Keeping Safe – physically, emotionally, sexually
- Substance Use
- Education, employment and Training/ finances
- Lack of Positive social outlets/ activities in their local area

This group of young men were excellent in articulating their views and felt most comfortable doing this when they felt safe, relaxed, the atmosphere was informal and fun and when they had eaten! To achieve this the VOYPIC Youth Rights Workers created a safe space for the young men to talk openly and honestly about the needs they and their peers in the community face. The safe space was created by agreeing a group contract that allowed the young men to talk about their experiences, learn from each other and guest speakers, in a confidential and mutually respectful environment. This also allowed for young people and VOYPIC staff to explore sensitive issues and challenge/educate.

As the group progressed the young men began to explore ideas on how they could share their knowledge with others and create a resource to support other young males. They came up with the idea of "A pizza advice". The young men created a QR code with links to support

organisations/advice on topics they identified. They presented this code in a pizza box, with a pizza inside. In the final week of the project the young men with other young men attending the local YMCA to share “A pizza advice” with them.

Outcomes achieved:

- Those with lived experience co-designing a project that highlighted needs of young men
- Creating a safe place for informal education to occur
- Young men to make a positive change in their own communities and with their own peer group by designing and sharing a resource focusing on men’s health well-being and safety.

Impact of Project:

- Young men developed their social skills, communication and interpersonal skills.
- Engaged in physical activity with Personal trainer
- Raised awareness of support services in their area
- Increased knowledge on the risks of substance misuse and the supports available
- Increased knowledge on the area of young men and violence, the culture, the consequences and supports available via Youth Justice Agency
- Increased knowledge of healthy relationships
- Develop healthy relationships with peers and VOYPIC staff
- Improved engagement with local support services and agencies
- Build confidence and self-esteem working as a group to achieve their idea from start to finish and share this with others

Care Experienced Young People and Healthy relationships.

Both projects we have shared with Relate NI for this piece of research demonstrated the need for education and discussion with care experienced young people around healthy relationships and issues that impact on them and their relationships.

‘Young people who have been in care are more likely to have experienced high rates of childhood adversity, including family dysfunction, poverty, parental mental health and abuse²⁵’. In VOYPIC, we understand that care experienced young people are more likely to have been exposed to increased levels of trauma, and whilst we have no research to tell us how this has/will impact on their future intimate relationships, our young people describe to us the high tolerance they have for abuse in relationships. Quite often, they are unaware that they are in an abusive relationship until they are discussing it with other ‘safe’ adults in their lives. Sometimes they reject this information and don’t believe they are in an abusive relationship as they think this is normal, this is what they were used to, or their low self-esteem has them believing this is what they deserve.

This therefore highlights the need for both statutory and voluntary organisations who are supporting care experienced young people to be aware of the issues facing them, have the tools and the information to have difficult conversations, and have resources, groups and organisations to be able to sign post the young people to the appropriate support.

Conclusion

Healthy family relationships, including inter-parental relationships, are critical to children’s life chances. The family support infrastructure in Northern Ireland provides parents, carers, guardians and children with access to invaluable support and services, however more needs to be done to ensure that relational capability is built; relationships are prevented from falling into states of distress in as much as is possible; and people are protected at times of crisis such as relationship breakdown. Parenting and family support often focuses exclusively on parental behaviours, skills and techniques at the cost of focusing on the parental relationship and its impact on children. Overall, this this research project has found that relationships have a fundamental role in nurturing and maintaining people’s wellbeing, as well as the quality of family and community environments. The quality of attachment with family, friends, and romantic partners has important implications across multiple domains in society including education, employment, health and social care, and criminal justice. However, currently there is a significant strategic gap in policy, in identifying the integral role of healthy relationships across key priority areas. As such, a key recommendation of this research is the development of a *Healthy Relationships Strategy*, which would involve a centrally driven, structural approach to embedding the role of relationships within government policy.

²⁵ Macalister, 2022; Teyhan et al., 2019

Final recommendations and associated policies

Recommendations:	Actions:	Outcomes:	Policy for review:
1. Support during pregnancy and transition to parenthood	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Provide ante-natal classes b. Provide post-natal classes c. Access to individual therapy d. Assess for IPV at ante- and post-natal appointments e. Support for women's physical recovery and sexual health after childbirth f. Increase paid parental leave g. Provide or fund community-based groups or programmes 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Supports maternal-foetal attachment • Supports women's health and recovery • Increased parental emotional regulation • Improved parental-infant attachment • Improved inter-parental relationship • Earlier opportunity for intervention for child maltreatment, attachment issues parental stress • Develop community networks • Reduce parental isolation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Mental health strategy delivery plan for 2021/31 (2022) ✓ Breastfeeding - A Great Start A Strategy for Northern Ireland 2013-2023 (2013) ✓ Making Life Better (2014) ✓ Caring for people beyond tomorrow - strategic framework (2015) ✓ Infant Mental Health Framework for Northern Ireland (2016) ✓ Strategy for maternity care in Northern Ireland 2012 to 2018 ✓ Stopping Domestic and Sexual Violence and Abuse in Northern Ireland (2016)
2. Support for parents with young children and teenagers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Assess for maltreatment b. Assess for parental mental health or attachment issues c. Support with transition to parenthood d. Provide age-related support with parenting young children and teenagers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improved inter-parental relationship • Less divorce and family separation • Less parental stress and depression • Reduced adolescent depression • Improved family well-being 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Mental health strategy delivery plan for 2021/31 (2022) ✓ Making Life Better (2014) ✓ Caring for people beyond tomorrow - strategic framework (2015)

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> e. Increase paid parental leave f. Increase childcare supports g. Provide parenting programmes to address stress reduction h. Education for parents that facilitates parent communication skills i. Education on parenting children and adolescents with social media j. Support with the inter-parental relationship k. Provide or fund community-based groups or programmes l. Community based home visiting programs m. Support parents with children with special needs n. Policy makers can improve and support with economic resources 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improved quality of life • Improved infant and children's mental health • Reduced peer bullying • Reduced family aggression, conflict, or violence • Reduced sibling bullying • Promote pro-social behaviour in the community • Reduced violent attitudes • Develop community networks • Reduce parental isolation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Infant Mental Health Framework for Northern Ireland (2016)
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<p>3. Support parent-adolescent attachment</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Education on parenting styles b. Support parental communication and provision of RSE c. Provide separate parenting programmes d. Provide parent-adolescent attachment-based treatments 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improved parent-adolescent relationship • Improved family functioning • Improved parenting for next generation • Reduce parental stress 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Mental health strategy delivery plan for 2021/31 (2022) ✓ Making Life Better (2014)
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| <p>e. Support parents with stress management</p> <p>f. Provide support and resources for young people and parents involved with social services to remain in the family home</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Protection from homelessness • Protection from IPV • Protection from bullying • Improved adolescent mental health • Reduced suicidality • Increase pro-social behaviour • Protection from homelessness pathways |
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5. Support for individuals and families exposed to family violence

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| <p>a. Assess for IPV exposure in childhood and adolescents</p> <p>b. Assess for sibling relationship quality</p> <p>c. Assess for anxious attachment</p> <p>d. Provide intervention for children who have been exposed to IPV</p> <p>e. Support the inter-parental relationship</p> <p>f. Promote parenting strategies for consistent and stable role modelling of healthy relationships</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Protection from IPV • Protection from bullying • Improved mental health • Breaks the cycle of IPV and child maltreatment • Reduced inter-parental conflict • Improved relationships • Improved family functioning • Improved modelling • Protection from homelessness pathways | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Mental health strategy delivery plan for 2021/31 (2022) ✓ Making Life Better (2014) ✓ Caring for people beyond tomorrow - strategic framework (2015) ✓ Stopping Domestic and Sexual Violence and Abuse in Northern Ireland (2016) |
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	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> g. Support for the parent-child relationship h. Provide adolescents with individual counselling to develop relational models i. Whole family approach to address the family environment and its impact on adolescent involvement in IPV j. Provide support to address the cumulative effects of multiple forms of trauma as a result of IPV k. Provide psychoeducation group-based interventions focusing on skill trainings to couples experiencing violence or conflict in their relationship l. Engage fathers and family violence prevention messaging and education m. Supporting well-being after experience of IPV n. Support with intergenerational trauma <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. 		✓
6. Support for young people in alternative care provision	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Prioritize relational permanency over legal permanency b. Ecosystem approach – “wrap around treatment” 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Support transition to young adulthood • Increase likelihood of completion of higher-level education 	✓ Mental health strategy delivery plan for 2021/31 (2022) ✓ Making Life Better (2014)

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> c. Training for foster parents, adoptive parents and kinship providers on supporting young people with trauma, loss, and grief d. Offered therapeutic interventions for trauma e. Multifaceted support programmes to include professionals and wider community to build a network that lasts beyond exit from care 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Employment stability • Improved well-being and mental health • Improved relationships • Improved quality of life • Protection from IPV victimisation and perpetration • Protection from homelessness • Protection from substance use 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Caring for people beyond tomorrow - strategic framework (2015) ✓ A Life Deserved (2021) ✓ Stopping Domestic and Sexual Violence and Abuse in Northern Ireland (2016)
<p>16. Support for families involved in alternative care provision</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Provide therapeutic approaches to families experiencing intergenerational care placements b. Trauma and grief support to families who have had a child removed to care c. Ensure family networks are supported with contact and communication d. Support for foster parents with grief and loss and allowing breaks between placements to process loss of foster child 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improved well-being and mental health • Improved family relationships • Improved quality of life • Reduce intergenerational cycles of care involvement 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Mental health strategy delivery plan for 2021/31 (2022) ✓ Making Life Better (2014) ✓ Caring for people beyond tomorrow - strategic framework (2015) ✓ Stopping Domestic and Sexual Violence and Abuse in Northern Ireland (2016)

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