LEADING THE WAY

Preparing young people for leaving care
A Guide for Carers

NSW Government
Human Services
Community Services
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LEADING THE WAY

A GUIDE TO PREPARING YOUNG PEOPLE FOR LEAVING CARE

INTRODUCTION

Everyone can benefit from some support and guidance as they mature into an adult, particularly someone who has been in care and may have had an unstable family life. These young people also need good independent living skills as they may have less adult support than most and may have to fend for themselves at a relatively early age.

To help with this, young people in care are usually given a copy of the Community Services booklet *Your Next Step* soon after their 15th birthday. It provides information about how a plan will be developed for when they leave care including what support and financial assistance is available.

It also explains that ‘leaving care’ simply means the young person has turned 18 and their care order has ended. It does not necessarily mean they have to leave their carer’s home although this might happen at the same time.

*Your Next Step* is full of information but is no substitute for the personal support provided by you, the carer. To help in this role, we’ve written *Leading the Way*, a guide to preparing young people for leaving care. We hope you find it useful.
HOW TO USE LEADING THE WAY

Leading the Way is divided into three sections:

• Teaching Life Skills1
• Putting Things in Place, and
• Managing Expectations.

For teenagers aged 15 and 16 the focus should be on developing life skills. They need opportunities to practise skills such as cooking and discussing issues such as credit or looking for work. The Teaching Life Skills section gives practical advice on how to teach these skills to young people in care.

During the last year of care there is a greater emphasis on making sure that goals in the young person’s leaving care plan are being progressed. What will their source of income be, where will they be living, do they have a job, are they enrolled in tertiary education, training or an apprenticeship? The Putting Things in Place section provides a guide to make sure the most important issues are being considered.

Both you and the young person in your care need to be clear about what life will be like after they leave care. This can raise some difficult issues: for example, would you be happy for them to continue socialising with your children and dropping in for meals? How will you feel if you want them to continue living with you but they can’t wait to leave? The Managing Expectations section raises some of these issues and may help you prepare for them.

There is no need to work through each of the sections in turn or to complete them within a certain timeframe. They are a guide to help you make the most of opportunities as and when they arise.

You are not expected to know everything or to do it without support. This booklet will guide you but you can always ask for help or advice from your caseworker or foster care agency. There are also support services that the young person in your care may be able to be referred to for professional help.

With your help, the adolescent in your care will be able to make the most of every opportunity to grow into a happy and successful adult. This is a time for you both to look forward to.

“With your help, the adolescent in your care will be able to make the most of every opportunity to grow into a happy and successful adult.”

1. The Teaching Life Skills section is based on Ready, Set, Fly, an initiative of the Casey Family Programs operating in the United States.
TEACHING LIFE SKILLS

It often takes several years for young people to make the transition to adulthood. Along the way they need to develop skills such as cooking, looking after their health and budgeting.

You are the best person to teach these skills as you know the young person's strengths and interests, what they do well and where they struggle. You can also provide regular opportunities to practise familiar skills or learn new ones.

Many skills are already taught by you when you involve children and young people in everyday activities. How you shop for bargains, find information about train timetables or keep in touch with friends are all behaviours that young people will copy if they see how you do it. This is called modelling behaviour and is a very casual and informal way of teaching.

The brochure Your Next Step is available on the Community Services website and lists other useful websites. Most are youth friendly and some have interactive tools or games for learning about subjects like buying a car. Look up some of these websites with the young person in your care, discussing the issues and adding to them with your own experiences.

Your Next Step includes a short list of living skills. This is just to start a young person thinking about what they should be able to do for themselves as an adult; however, there is no rush to take on adult responsibilities.

The Community Services website has a list of living skills available at www.community.nsw.gov.au/leaving_care. The list is designed for care leavers and may include some items that you don’t know the answer to; for example, who to contact if there are problems after having left care. These items should usually be considered in the final year of care but if you have any questions before then, talk to your caseworker or foster care agency.

The tips in this section are just suggestions for practical ways to help someone learn. Feel free to use them or your own ideas about teaching life skills.

“Modelling behaviour is a casual and informal way of teaching.”
MONEY

Most young people start out with limited amounts of money and a poor idea of how it should be managed. Some make mistakes that see them end up with large debts and poor credit ratings that affect them for years.

This can be overcome with good money habits such as keeping to a budget, having a regular savings plan and shopping for value rather than buying on impulse.

This section has ideas on how you can help young people develop good money habits and to start thinking about how they can make their money last.

Beliefs about money

1. What money means to you
   Talk to the young person in your care about what money means to them. How important is it? What is it used for? What are their priorities for money - buying a mobile phone, clothes, saving for a car, investing? Help them explore their attitudes to money.

Savings

2. Saving for a goal
   A young person might want to save up for something expensive like a trip away with friends. Help them to work out how much it will cost and how much they need to save each week to reach the target in time. Suggest they draw up a chart or graph so they can mark off progress and see how close they are getting to their goal.

3. Develop a regular savings plan
   Encourage the young person in your care to work out a savings plan and to stick to it. This can be very basic; for example, one third to long-term savings (not to be used until they leave home), one third to short-term savings (for the things they want but don’t yet have enough for) and one third they can spend straight away.
Tax

4. **Income tax**
   Talk to the young person in your care about the different parts of a payslip including the amount of tax that was deducted. If they work, use their payslip or, if you don’t mind sharing the information, use your own.

5. **Goods and services tax (GST)**
   Point out how some ads will give a price but have ‘plus GST’hiden in the small print. Explain how to calculate the total price and the importance of checking any quotes to see if GST is included.

Banking and credit

6. **Banks and credit unions**
   Talk about the savings institution you use and the services they offer including the account you use for your day-to-day banking, ATM services, online banking, credit cards or personal loans and the fees and interest charged for each of these. Explain the difference between an access account that pays low interest and an investment account that pays higher interest. For a young person who finds it difficult to save, an investment account with limited access may be the best way for them to achieve their saving goals.

7. **Buying a car**
   Buying a car is a high priority for many young people and often involves borrowing. Discuss the options of buying a cheaper car or borrowing to buy a more expensive car. What will the costs end up for both? Will the cheaper car cost more to maintain because it may not be in as good condition? How much will the interest add up to over the life of the loan for the more expensive car and will it cost more to insure each year, especially for a young driver? Will the more expensive car be easier to sell later but have lost more of its value?

8. **Money troubles**
   Mobile phones and interest-free periods on loans are common causes of debt and bad credit ratings for young people. Talk about how easy it is to fall into debt when spending money you don’t have to pay until later. Together, look for the services in *Your Next Step* that can help with debt or if you just need advice about money.
9. Develop a budget
Help the young person in your care develop a budget. You can use one of the tools on the internet (see *Your Next Step*) or draw up your own basic version. At the very least, it should show their income, fixed expenses such as board or pre-paid mobile fees, and variable expenses such as clothing and outings.

10. Practise living on a budget
The best time to experiment with living on a budget is before leaving home. Work out with your teen how much you spend on them each month. This may include their mobile phone, clothes, lunches, toiletries, pocket money and food that only they eat. Include infrequent expenses like a haircut. Then, ask them to develop their own budget. At the start of the month put the cash into separate envelopes for each expense and let the young person manage how they are used. If they run out of money don’t give them any extra. At the end of the month talk about what went well and what didn’t. Did they run up a big phone bill, buy more expensive clothes than they needed or spend too much on snacks? If they have money left over think about letting them spend it or save it for unexpected expenses. As they get better at managing the money stop putting it into envelopes but ask them to draw up a more detailed budget to help keep track. Explain how direct debit or Centrepay can be used to make regular payments to help with budgeting.

11. Where did it all go?
If the young person is having trouble keeping to a budget get them to write down everything they spend in a month. This may show that the budget is too restrictive or it may show where money is being wasted. Talk about their priorities for spending. For example, do they really think a third of their money should be spent on their mobile phone?

12. Comparison shopping
Show how to make money go further by shopping around. Find the same item, such as a CD, in different stores or online and compare the prices. Compare the price of generic brands with name brands. If the young person insists on name brands give them a budget for an item and tell them if they want a more expensive brand they have to use their own money to make up the difference.
Housing

Unfortunately, many young people find themselves homeless or in unstable housing after they leave care. This may be because they had not thought about where they would be living, were not prepared well enough to find and maintain a suitable place to live, or did not allow enough time to find a place.

Whether the person in your care moves out when they turn 18 or later, they need to learn how to go about finding somewhere to live, their options and the cost of housing.

Housing options

1. What do I need/want?
   Ask the young person in your care what they would look for in a place to live and to put them in order of importance. Did they list things like big rooms, a good view or fancy appearance ahead of practicalities such as close proximity to transport, work or a place of study? If so, talk about the difference between needs and wants. Discuss other factors they may want to consider such as number of bedrooms, furnished or unfurnished, whether pets are allowed and proximity to friends and support networks.

2. Reality check
   Not everyone can afford to live in a big house in the best location. Look at ads for houses or apartments for rent and compare the prices for different sizes and locations. Discuss what the young person may be able to afford either by themselves or sharing with others. Help them explore a range of options to work out what is possible within their budget. Options include social housing assistance such as public or community housing tenancies that are subsidised, or assistance to access private rental. You can go to www.housingpathways.nsw.gov.au for more information or ask your caseworker to help.

3. Having a flatmate
   It is common for people to share accommodation to keep costs down, but for some, moving from a family home to sharing with another person of similar age can be difficult. There is no older adult to take charge so everyone in the household must share responsibilities. There will be a need for compromise and cooperation. Have the young person in your care list the pros and cons of having a flatmate, living with relatives or a boyfriend/girlfriend.

Housing questions

What do I need?
What can I afford?
Do I want a flatmate?
Where do I start looking?
How do I choose?
What to do in an emergency?
4. Where to look
Share the story of how you found your first place to live. Together with the young person, see how many different ways you can find places to rent. Use the internet, newspaper and real estate magazine ads, community noticeboards or any other ways you can think of. Together, look for the services in Your Next Step that can help with housing.

5. Choosing the right place
Inspect a couple of apartments or houses that are for rent even if the young person in your care is not intending to move yet. Ask what they think about the condition of the property, the size of the rooms, the standards of the fittings etc. Have them work out what their share of the rent would be if they shared with one person per bedroom. Ask them to make up a checklist of what to inspect before moving into a place.

6. Emergency accommodation
The time to talk about emergency accommodation is before it is needed. Together, look for the services in Your Next Step that can help with crisis or temporary accommodation. Even better, help the young person plan their accommodation needs well in advance so that they can minimise or prevent their need for emergency shelter.

Housing costs

7. Starting out
Ask the young person in your care to write down everything they would have to pay for if they were to move into their own place next week. Give them plenty of time to do this, then go through the list and talk about what they missed. You may have to explain what some costs are. Make sure you discuss bond, advance rent, connection fees for utilities, basic household items and ongoing costs such as food, rent and utilities. Ask them to list the basic items they would need such as a bed, linen and kitchen utensils. Help them identify where they can get assistance with these costs, eg. Housing NSW may be able to assist with bond payment and the Transition to Independent Living Allowance (TILA) can help with other set-up costs. See Your Next Step for more details.

8. Keeping a reserve
What happens if the young person is sharing a place and someone moves out? Will they be able to cover the rent until they find a new flatmate? What if they lose their job or their hours of work are cut back? Talk to them about the importance of having a cash reserve so they don’t end up with a broken lease or no place to live.

“Ask them to make up a checklist of what to inspect before moving into a place.”
9. Tenancy agreements
A tenancy agreement may be the first contract a young person signs as an adult. Talk to them about what it means to sign a legal document and the consequences of breaking the lease. This can include losing their bond or being charged rent until the property is re-let or the lease expires. Explain how breaking a lease can make it hard to rent somewhere else. If you have a copy of a tenancy agreement, show it to them.

10. Maintaining a tenancy
Talk about what is needed to successfully maintain a tenancy and avoid breaching the tenancy agreement. Important things they should know include:

• budget carefully to ensure rent is paid on time
• keep the property in good condition
• be careful not to disturb neighbours – this includes managing visitors carefully; for example, not having loud parties too often
• seek permission from the landlord if a visitor is going to stay for an extended period of time.

Together, look for the services in *Your Next Step* that can help with problems with landlords or renting, including what to do if the young person is evicted from their property.
Education and training are important for employment prospects, and all young people can benefit from good study habits and an understanding of vocational training.

This is particularly important for those in care as they may be disadvantaged in their studies because of disruptions to family life or limited finances. There are supports specifically for this group and the young person in your care should be encouraged to take advantage of the help on offer. You can read about financial help for study in the section called *Putting Things in Place* or look for services in *Your Next Step*.

### Study skills

1. **Learning styles**
   
   There are different ways to learn. Some people learn best by hearing, some by seeing and others by doing. For example, to learn a mathematical formula some students will repeat it out loud, some will write it down several times and others need to use it regularly. Ask your teen which subjects they like best and talk to them about whether it is the content that interests them or the way it is taught. Talk about how they prefer to learn and how they can apply these preferences to their studies or training.

2. **Study environment**
   
   Ask the young person to do some reading or maths problems for about 10 minutes at a time in different settings. These could be in front of a television, at the kitchen table, on their bed or at a desk. It could be in a quiet setting, with loud music or music playing quietly. Talk about how productive they were in each setting and where they could best concentrate on something they found challenging. Their views may not be accurate, so be prepared to challenge them by asking questions about the material they read or the number of maths problems they answered correctly.

### Motivation

3. **Use incentives**
   
   Consider using incentives if it is hard to get the young person to do homework or assignments. Encourage them to suggest the incentive plan which may range from time on the phone or watching television for small pieces of work to a special outing for completing a major assignment.

4. **Get involved**
   
   Show how important the young person’s education is to you by being involved in their life both in and out of school, eg homework, sporting events and social gatherings.

5. **Older youth as tutors**
   
   Encourage the young person in your care to help younger children with homework. This builds their self-esteem and reinforces their own learning. Some families may pay for this tutoring, making the experience even more rewarding.
Removing barriers

6. Disengagement
Sometimes people stop learning because of reasons not directly related to study. They may be depressed, being bullied, using alcohol or other drugs or they may have a learning disability. Talk to your teen about why they have lost interest, then speak to their school counsellor. Your caseworker may be able to refer the young person to a service that works specifically on disengagement from education.

7. Finances
Lack of money can be a barrier to education and training. This can be upfront fees that discourage a person from starting a course or commencing tertiary education, or ongoing costs that make it hard to continue. Research the costs of training or tertiary education together and check if they are eligible for any allowances. You will find places to start in Your Next Step. Talk about hidden costs such as travel and discuss ways to meet expenses. This can include part-time work throughout the year or during breaks from study. How will they cope if they rely on this work but it isn’t available when they need it? How much would they earn as an apprentice? It should be noted that allowances paid to carers can usually continue for a reasonable time if the person in their care is part way through full-time studies or training when they turn 18.

Choosing options

8. Which course or institution?
Some young people have a clear idea of what they want to do in life and the study or training needed to make it happen. Others are less certain and need help sorting out the options. Talk to the young person in your care about the type of work they want to do, and then look at the qualifications they will need. Is this level of study realistic for them? Could they perhaps be aiming higher or lower? What are the requirements for travel and commitment of time? Use Your Next Step to find information about jobs, qualifications needed and where they can study or train.
EMPLOYMENT

Finding work can be very competitive for young people as many of them start looking at the same time and few have much experience.

The ideas below will help prepare a young person to enter the workforce with confidence and a planned approach.

Motivation and career choice

1. **Why work?**
   
   If your teenager has friends who work, ask why their friends got jobs and what they can do because of this work. Can they afford to buy a car, go out more often? Do they miss out on anything because of their work? Overall, are they better or worse off?

2. **Starting early**
   
   A teen doesn’t have to wait until they finish school to start working. If the young person wants extra pocket money, they may be able to help out in the neighbourhood with babysitting, lawn mowing or tutoring. If they have an interest in music they may be able to work part time in a music store or in a hairdresser if that is what they are thinking of as a career.

3. **Career information days**
   
   Schools often hold career information days. Or there may be an exhibition near you. Take the young person in your care along and find out about as many of the careers that interest them as you can. Suggest they prepare questions before going so they can make the best use of the time available.

4. **Work experience**
   
   Be involved with helping the young person choose their work experience. At the end of each day talk about what they did and what they learnt about their future in the workforce. Encourage them to discuss their experiences with the school careers advisor.

5. **Information sources**
   
   *Your Next Step* lists internet sites with all sorts of information about careers. Some are divided into fields of interest and list the skills you need to work in different roles in that field. These are very helpful for making career choices.

Planning ahead

6. **Plan a pathway**
   
   Have the young person write their career goal at the top of a page. Starting at the bottom, ask them to write everything they are doing to help reach the goal. For example, if their goal is to be a veterinarian they may be volunteering at an animal shelter or working at a pet store. Above this, they can write other things to do to help reach their goal and the names of any people who can help them.
7. **Keep a work history**

Encourage the teenager in your care to keep a record of all the jobs they have had, including volunteer work. This should include dates, the type of work and names and contact numbers for people willing to give a reference. This record will be useful when completing a job application.

8. **Prepare a resume**

When the young person is starting to look for work have them prepare a resume that includes their work history and training. You can find examples of resumes and advice on the internet. The resume should be updated whenever there is anything new to add.

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**Finding and applying for work**

9. **Where to look for work**

Ask the young person to list all the ways they can think of to find a job. Talk about how to find a job rather than waiting for a job to find them. For example, if they have friends who are working, see if they can ask about any vacancies. If there is a company or a shop they are interested in, have them go in and tell them why they are interested. They may even want to leave a copy of their resume to show how keen they are.

10. **Prepare for interviews**

If the young person is offered a job interview, have them think about the questions they may be asked, how they meet the job criteria and what the employer will want to know about them. Do a practice interview, asking the questions they developed. Talk about what they answered well and what could be a little better. Make sure they sell themselves. Let them interview you so they see how to answer questions and hear what the answers sound like to the interviewer. Get them to write down any questions they may want to ask such as hours or rates of pay.

11. **Follow up on interviews**

Encourage the young person in your care to follow up after an interview with a thank you note, email or phone call. If they were unsuccessful have them ask if there is anything in particular they need to improve on or if there is a skill they should have before the company will employ them.
Health and wellbeing

Making sure that we get and stay healthy – physically and mentally – is a day-to-day task. When young people have control of their bodies and minds they are better able to address other concerns and work towards independence.

While normal behaviour can include moodiness, irritability or withdrawal, a distinct change that lasts at least a few weeks may be a sign of something more serious. Encourage the young person in your care to talk to you about their concerns but also make sure they know of other ways to get help. Talk about the services in Your Next Step such as Lifeline or the Kids Helpline, which has counselling online and by email as well as 24-hour telephone counselling.

If you are in any doubt, talk to your foster care agency about whether the young person should be receiving counselling.

Health and hygiene

1. Developing good hygiene habits
   Maintaining good hygiene starts with basic routines such as hand washing, showering and brushing teeth. As a young person matures, this expands to personal care such as physical appearance, hair and skin care. To help a young person through this period, devote some time to talking to them about the kinds of things that are important to them. You could get them to try various products that meet their hygiene needs and use this time to address the way they feel about themselves.

2. Caring for simple injuries
   Teaching about taking care of injuries and illness can start at any age. Use whatever opportunities come along to allow appropriate self treatment with band aids, disinfectant or ice packs. Explain how and why each is used.

3. Linking symptoms of illness to treatment
   Help young people recognise how they feel when they are sick, and ask them to be as specific as they can about their symptoms. Before giving any over-the-counter medication, have older youth read the label to see how it relates to their symptoms and what the correct dosage is, including the maximum dosage in a 24-hour period. Have them read warnings about seeing a doctor if the symptoms persist.

4. Finding a doctor or dentist
   If a young person needs a new doctor or dentist, walk them through the steps of finding one. Suggest looking in the phone book or asking people in the area to recommend someone. Talk about when you may need to go to the hospital instead of a general practitioner.

5. Going to the doctor
   Older youth need to know how to set up medical appointments. Let the teenager in your care make the appointment when they need to see a doctor or dentist. This may also be a good time to talk about joining a health fund.

6. Learning about prescription medication
   If the young person in your care takes prescription medication, make sure they understand what it is for and how it is used. When they run out and need to replace it, talk about why they take the medicine, how it helps and the possible consequences of not taking it correctly. This can include not finishing a course of antibiotics.
7. **Sex and sexual development**
As the young person in your care matures, you will need to find ways to cover issues relating to sexual development. Look at the NSW Family Planning website [www.fpnsw.org.au](http://www.fpnsw.org.au) or other sites on the internet for information that will support you with what to talk about and how to say it. Remember that young people in care may have been abused and may be reluctant to talk about sex or their body so don’t force the conversation on them.

8. **Basic anatomy**
Teach the young person the correct anatomical names for the parts of their bodies. Try to provide honest answers to their questions about sexuality, or provide them with age-appropriate written materials that cover the basics of human sexuality. The internet or local Youth Health Services could support you with this information.

9. **Healthy relationships**
Role models are important for teaching young people about healthy relationships. Ask the young person in your care who they think has a good example of a healthy relationship. Discuss their response including what they think healthy and unhealthy relationships look like. Ask what they think a person should do if they are in an unhealthy relationship.

10. **Peer pressure and sex**
Peer pressure can affect a young person’s decisions about sexual behaviour. Tell them a story about peer pressure faced by yourself or someone you know and how it was handled. Ask whether they think kids sometimes “talk up” their sexual activities to look grown up to their friends or have sex just to fit in. Explore and role play ways to resist negative peer pressure.

11. **Early parenthood**
Discuss the responsibilities of parenthood and explore the impact they think being a teenage mother or father would have on their life. Ask what they know about contraception and safe sex, and remind them that knowledge alone won’t avoid a pregnancy or sexually transmitted disease (STD) unless it is put into practise.
Personal wellbeing

12. Stress busters
Stress affects people of all ages. When a young person gets worked up about something, teach them to take five to 10 deep breaths to calm down. Offer to go for a walk with them when they’re stressed, or have them walk (or run!) around the block. Talk about things you do to calm down such as, taking a shower or bath, phoning a friend, listening to music or playing with a family pet.

13. Anxiety
When a young person is worried about something invite them to problem solve with you. Ask them to come up with at least three ideas for dealing with the problem that’s worrying them. Evaluate each idea and what the likely outcome would be. Encourage the young person to choose a solution and try it out. Reassure them that one solution they can always use is to ask for your help.

14. Self-harm
Some young people do harmful things to themselves such as cutting or burning parts of their body. If a young person comes home with a story about how someone in their school did this, talk about the incident. Ask what they think caused the person to act that way. Ask how they would get help if feeling alone, sad, overwhelmed, etc. If you see evidence of self harm on the young person in your care, ask them to stop and seek professional help immediately. Do not ignore this behaviour.

15. Watch the self-talk
If you hear the young person in your care making negative comments about themselves (“I’m so stupid,” “I can’t do anything right”), call attention to it. Ask what they mean or challenge what they’re saying. Help them remember things they can do well by talking about or looking at old photos or point out things they have done well that week. Praise them for their efforts and thank them when they help out around the house.
Daily living skills

There are many things young people need to learn in order for their lives to run smoothly. Learning daily living skills – including meal planning, grocery shopping, cooking, cleaning and home safety – are important to make sure that they know how a home functions.

Nutrition and menu planning

1. Variety and balance
   Sharing a meal at the table provides an opportunity to talk about nutrition, different parts of the meal and why they are important. Meat/poultry/beans provide protein, vegetables/fruit provide vitamins and minerals, starches provide carbohydrates for energy, dairy foods make our bones strong.

2. Healthy snacks
   When shopping, have the young person choose a variety of healthy snack foods. Talk about what makes a snack healthy. In addition, invite them to make some healthy snacks (e.g., crackers with dip, popcorn or muesli bars).

3. Make a favourite-recipes cookbook
   After making a meal, have the young person determine whether or not to include it in their own “cookbook”. By creating a cookbook of nutritious meals they enjoy, the young person will be encouraged and more likely to maintain a healthy diet.
**Grocery shopping**

4. Developing a shopping list

Involve them in developing a family shopping list. Be sure they include the ingredients for any meals they want to make. Pay attention to other items like cleaning products that they may not think to buy. When shopping, carry a calculator and ask them to add up the cost of each item.

5. Comparison shopping in the supermarket

Involve the young person when shopping. For example, they could be responsible for finding certain items on the list. Tell them to compare brands and determine which is cheaper, healthiest or the best value. Talk about quality versus cost and why the least expensive item is not always the best one to buy.

6. Choosing good produce

Involve the young person in your care in picking out the fruits and vegetables on your list. Show them how to tell if the food is fresh. Have them check on the internet about when fruits and vegetables come into season and talk about what it means to buy produce that is not in season.

7. Shopping alone

Pull together everything an older youth has learned about meal planning and shopping by letting them plan a day’s or week’s worth of meals, develop the shopping list and purchase everything with a set amount of money.

**Food preparation**

8. Hands-on practise

Involve a young person in cooking. Start by asking them to help with part of a meal. As they gain confidence and skill they may be able to move on to preparing the family dinner once a week.

9. Practise with recipes

Although we don’t use recipes every time we cook, it is good to know how. When the young person in your care would like to fix something special, have them choose a recipe from a cookbook. You can supervise them reading and following the recipe. If the meal was a success, have them copy the recipe into their own cookbook.

10. Food storage

After a meal is finished, have the young person be responsible for putting away any leftover items. Explain what can be safely kept, for how long and how it should be stored. Discuss the use of leftovers in other recipes. For example, if they make a stew or casserole, any leftovers could be turned into a pie for another meal.
**Household chores and safety**

11. Develop a weekly chore roster

Establish a weekly family chore roster so everyone is clear about their responsibilities. If possible, rotate the tasks so the distribution of work is fair and everyone gets to see how what they do, or don’t do, can create work for others. For example, if the young person’s job is to clean the bathroom they quickly learn not to leave toothpaste all over the basin.

12. Beginning to do laundry

Introduce the young person to the idea of doing laundry by giving them a basket to put their washing in and showing them how to use the washing machine and/or dryer. Let them get used to washing a load of their clothing on their own. Teach them about sorting clothes into whites, light colours and dark colours and about reading clothing labels, especially items that need handwashing or can’t be put in the dryer.

**Transport**

13. Getting around

Knowing how to read a map or find your way to places you go to regularly is important, but many young people sit back and take no notice of the route that is followed. Ask the young person in your care to notice landmarks such as street signs and buildings, and to give you directions the next time you go the same way.

14. Public transportation

Using public transport can be an important key to independence. When planning an outing, have the young person look up timetables or ring their local service for information.
It’s normal for young people to question who they are and where they fit into the world. You may have already seen or heard the young person in your care questioning what their peers think of them, how the community treats them, or what their place is in both your family and their birth family.

The way a young person sees these issues will form many of their values and attitudes while contributing to their opinions about self, relationships, work, ethics and life in general. It’s important to support them through this difficult time and make sure you are emotionally available.

Alcohol, drugs and tobacco

1. Testing attitudes and knowledge
   When a story about a celebrity’s alcohol or drug abuse is in the news, use it to explore your teen’s attitudes and knowledge. This may be a sensitive issue if they came into care because of similar issues in their family and they may have strong emotional responses.

2. Practise for peer pressure
   Role play with them to help them find solutions to different situations. For example, you might say, “You’ll be at a party next week and someone’s going to offer you some beer. What are you going to do?” Or, “What would you do if somebody says, ‘Come on, have a cigarette’?”

Personal development

3. Picture yourself
   Have a young person cut out pictures, words and phrases from a magazine that describe how they see themselves or things that are important to them. Make a collage with all of the pictures and words. Talk about their choices and what they mean. Talk about what kind of self-image is communicated by the pictures/words they’ve chosen.

4. Strengths list
   Help your teenager to make a list of their strengths and things they do well. It could be simple things like having good manners or being good at a sport. Try to include some thoughts about the type of person they are. For example, you might say that they are good at helping or comforting their friends.
6. Social inclusion

It’s important for any young person to have leisure activities that involve others and not spend all of their time alone. This can be hard to achieve for some care leavers who become socially isolated after leaving their carer’s home. Encourage the young person in your care to develop a network of friends and activities that they will be able to continue with after they leave care. If they move out of the area they can still maintain contact with friends and can find a new group where they can continue the activities they enjoy.

7. Cultural identity

Young people in care may come from a different culture or community than yours. If this is the case, ask how they feel about it and if they want to learn more about their culture. Discuss whether this can be done through contact with their birth family or, if not, help them to find and join a cultural or community association.

8. Watch yourself in action

If a young person is having trouble with some part of communication (like saying how they feel about something or telling someone they are angry without becoming aggressive), have them practise with you. Ask what they think about how they’re coming across. Reverse the roles and use their language and mannerisms so they can see what it sounds like from the other person’s point of view.

9. Learning to negotiate

It’s important for young people to learn to negotiate. If a young person is upset about something they’ve been asked to do, teach them how to politely ask if it can be changed. For example, if you’ve told them to clean up their room in the middle of their favourite TV show and they are upset, suggest that they ask you (nicely) if they can do it right after the show. If it’s okay with you, let them do it the way they are suggesting. Explain that while it’s fine to ask, not everything is negotiable – sometimes they will just have to do what you say when you say it.

5. There’s more than one way to communicate

If you have a young person in your care who has a hard time expressing emotions, write notes to them. Sit near them and pass notes back and forth about how they’re feeling, what’s wrong, etc., leave a note in their room or write in a journal. Writing can be less threatening because tone of voice and eye contact is not involved. It also allows us to think through what we want to say before we “say” it.
Teaching a young person about their legal rights and responsibilities is an important part of their transition into adulthood. The information provided in this section is not meant to provide legal advice but to introduce some concepts of rights and responsibilities. More information about this can be found by contacting your local community legal centre or the legal advice services listed in *Your Next Step*.

### Rights

1. **Knowing your rights**
   Ask the young person in your care to list as many of their personal and legal rights as they can. You could make this competitive with some of their friends or siblings to see who can come up with the biggest list. Let them use the internet or other resources for help.

2. **Matching responsibilities**
   After the young person has come up with a list of rights, see if they can match each one with a responsibility. For example, a right could be “free speech” while the responsibility may be “respect for others”.

3. **Exercising rights**
   Involve the young person in activities where you are exercising your rights. For example, if you have bought something that doesn’t work, take them to the store with you when you have it replaced.

4. **Learning about the law and legal issues**
   TV shows provide opportunities to talk about a variety of issues. If you are watching a program that shows someone dealing with a legal issue talk to the young person about it. Discuss the crime involved and their attitude to it. See if they can understand the consequences of not obeying the law.

5. **Coming under the police spotlight**
   Young people may come to the attention of the police for several reasons. They may be asked to move on if they are loitering or creating a disturbance, questioned about a crime, charged with an offence or just asked to provide their identification. They should always cooperate but should also be aware of their rights. Together, check their rights at some of the internet sites listed in *Your Next Step*. They should be aware that some rights shown on American TV shows, such as the right to a phone call, are not an automatic right in Australia.
Dealing with discrimination

If you or the young person in your care experience any type of discrimination, talk as a family about the situation. Talk about the feelings that come up when someone discriminates against you and use it as an opportunity to teach the importance of not acting that way towards others. Teach the young person how to handle discrimination when they encounter it by explaining that it is not the fault of the person discriminated against but shows a lack of understanding or experience by the other person. Depending on the situation it might be best to ignore the incident, take the opportunity to challenge and inform the person who is prejudiced, or report it to someone who can take action.

Identification and voting

Can you prove who you are?
Teenagers and young adults need identification to prove their age and identity. Help the young person list all of their identification papers. This might include a birth certificate, Medicare card, Healthcare card, Proof of Age card, RTA Photo Card, driver’s licence, student ID or a passport. Together, find out what identification documents are needed to apply for government services such as a Centrelink benefit or public housing.

Get in early with voting
When the young person is 17, help them understand voting processes by registering with the Electoral Commission. At 17, the Commission will set them up on the system so that their details are registered in advance.
PUTTING THINGS IN PLACE

WHAT ARE LEAVING CARE PLANS?

Agencies must plan for when a person leaves care. This applies to young people in foster care, and in relative or kinship care where the care arrangement has occurred under an order of the Children’s Court. Although people can move to independent living earlier, in most cases, this happens when they turn 18 and the order placing them in care ends.

Arrangements must be made to ensure young people don’t leave formal care without somewhere to live, a source of income and an understanding of who can provide them with support.

While this is referred to as leaving care or moving to independent living, it does not necessarily mean that the young person will move out of their carer’s home. Many stay on as part of the family while others move out to explore life on their own.

The early stages of planning for independent living, beginning at 15, are mainly about developing life skills and exploring options for education, training and employment.

Around the time the young person turns 17, planning starts to focus on what they will be doing after leaving care. Their caseworker or agency worker should be talking to them about a written plan that includes where they will live, whether they will be working or studying, where their money will be coming from, how they will look after any health issues, and who they can turn to if they have problems.

The plan will set out strategies to be used to help the young person achieve their goals. For example, if they want to move into a place of their own while studying, the plan might say:

- the young person will apply for social housing assistance and Centrelink study benefits
- Community Services will provide money for establishment costs and textbooks
- the young person’s care agency will help them apply for the Transition to Independent Living Allowance (TILA)
- other services the young person needs to support them in sustaining a tenancy.

The plan is designed to ensure that all of the necessary supports are in place to allow the care leaver to succeed in life as a young adult.

Planning begins earlier (two years before leaving care) for young people with a disability who are likely to have significant support needs and involves Ageing, Disability and Home Care. These young people enter a program to address their individual needs in a holistic manner. The program provides support for tenancy and housing issues, living skills development and social connection.
Young people who leave care aged 15 or older after having been in care for at least 12 months are entitled to a leaving care plan. They should be involved in the planning process, given information about support services and offered follow-up support from their care agency after they leave care.

Care leavers should also be assessed to see if they are eligible for financial help from Community Services. This could be a fortnightly payment or one-off contingency payments.

The After Care Payment is a short-term fortnightly payment made to people aged 15 to 24 to help with accommodation. This is usually available only if the care leaver is studying or training full time.

Contingency payments are one-off payments available before or after leaving care to help with:

- education or training (includes buying books and other training materials and up to 10 driving lessons where this would improve employment prospects)
- counselling and support
- fees to access records or certificates to resolve identity issues
- establishment costs for accommodation
- costs for legal advice where government-funded legal aid and law access services are unavailable
- dental treatment where timely services cannot be provided in the public health system
- respite or support workers to help develop independent living skills.

Not everyone is eligible for the Community Services payments and they will usually only be paid where mainstream support services are unable to help.

If a young person turns 18 while completing full-time studies or training, arrangements can usually be made to extend their current placement for a reasonable period.

Most care leavers are also entitled to the Transition to Independent Living Allowance (TILA) which is a one-off payment to help a care leaver set themselves up independently.

There is a lot of help available for young people apart from the care leaver entitlements mentioned here. Check out the lists of services in Your Next Step for other ways to get help.
WHAT ROLE CAN I PLAY?

Carers have a role to play in developing the young person’s leaving care plan.

Firstly, if you believe the planning process should have started but you haven’t heard from your care agency, contact them to find out what will happen and when. In many cases the planning may have already started with the agency collecting and reviewing information about the placement, but it is a good idea to let them know you are ready to start being involved in this important stage.

The care agency will usually want to involve you in the planning process. They may ask about the young person’s needs, whether you would be happy for them to stay on at your home and how you can help them apply for services like Centrelink benefits and social housing assistance.

A young person in care may want to distance themselves from their care agency or prove they can do things for themselves, particularly if there hasn’t been much recent contact with the agency. If this happens, encourage them to take an interest in developing the plan and reassure them it is okay to ask for and accept help at this time.

You should also encourage the young person in your care to allow the agency to contact them occasionally after they have left care. Sometimes things don’t work out as planned or unexpected problems come up. If the agency is able to keep in touch they can continue to provide help and support.

Probably the most important role you can play is to see that the young person’s leaving care plan reflects their goals and addresses their needs for the next few years, as well as identifying contingency plans if things don’t go according to plan.
MANAGING EXPECTATIONS

Young people in care are often unsure of what will happen when their care order ends. While their leaving care plan will help them understand the bigger issues such as where they will be living, it is often the unspoken concerns that have the biggest impact or that can bring plans undone.

As a carer, you will need to consider the changes that will take place in your life whether the young person moves out or stays on in your home.

This section describes some of the common problems that come from false expectations about the end of a care order. It does not attempt to tell you how to deal with what are sometimes emotional issues. Instead, it attempts to raise your awareness so you will be able to correct or deal with these expectations before they become a significant problem.

Consider each of the issues mentioned below and whether you need to discuss any of them with the young person. Or perhaps just reflect on your own feelings about what they mean to you.

**Having an independent adult in the house**

If a young person continues to live with you after they turn 18 you will both need to adapt to having another adult in the house. Like any teenager, they will want to assert their independence but they will need to abide by the house rules.

You might want to renegotiate those rules to make sure everyone is clear about the privileges, freedoms and responsibilities that come with being an adult. Will it be alright for them to bring someone home for the night or to stay out without letting you know beforehand? Will they be expected to pay board? What will and won't change?

**Misunderstandings about why the placement is ending**

By the time the leaving care plan is written, you and the young person in your care will know if they are to move out of your home. However, there could be misunderstandings about why this is to happen, especially if one of you wants the placement to continue.

You may consider the young person to be part of your family and want them to stay on. They were originally placed with you because they needed care and protection and you might have concerns for their safety if they move out. You might also have expected them to stay, and been surprised and confused by their decision to leave.

The young person may have become dependent on your support or expected that it was up to them to choose when to move out. They may not understand that you believe it’s time for them to experience independence or that you don’t think they should stay on as an adult.

Even if this issue has been discussed, either you or the young person may feel a sense of rejection at the end of the placement.
Post-care relationships

Both you and the care leaver need to understand what your relationship will be after they move out. Are they welcome to drop in any time for a meal or to do their washing? If there are any bills you currently pay for them such as a mobile phone account, will you continue to pay them? Will they have to take all their belongings with them or can they leave some until they have somewhere permanent to live? Will they have a key to your house? How would you feel if they let themselves in and raided the pantry while you were out?

What if the placement has been a difficult one? If there have been problems, are you happy for them to continue socialising with your children? Will they still take part in family gatherings such as a regular get-together at Christmas?

Usually, there isn’t enough discussion about post-care relationships so people develop their own expectations. These can be very different and lead to unnecessary tension or limit a young person’s options if their leaving care plan doesn’t work out.

Grief and loss

The young person, carer and the carer’s family may all experience feelings of grief and loss at the end of a placement.

When your own child leaves home as an adult you may be sad to see them go but you know they are still part of the family. However, when a young person in care leaves your home there may be a greater sense that you no longer have a place in each other’s lives.

This doesn’t apply in all cases, but for some these feelings can be significant. Young children in particular can be upset at the thought of losing a big brother or sister and may need to be carefully prepared.

Saying goodbyes

What opportunities will people have to say goodbye when a placement ends? Will there be a party or gathering to mark the occasion or does the care leaver prefer to leave quietly without any fuss?

Moving away from what may have been their family for many years can be traumatic for a young person. Being able to say goodbye or exchange mementoes, photos, etc can help to ease the pain.

Make sure you and the young person have kept their life story work up to date. A young person should leave with a thorough record of their time with you. Working with them to ensure their photos are in chronological order in an album helps build your relationship with them.

Unrealistic view of birth family

Many young people in care have an unrealistic view of their birth family. It is natural for someone to want to believe their mum or dad will provide them with love and care even if it hasn’t worked out that way in the past.

A young person may feel that as an adult they can handle any family situation or are no longer at risk. They may also believe they have a duty to help family members overcome the problems that led to them being removed in the first instance.

A young person who returns to their birth family at 18 for any of these reasons, without having given it careful thought, may be disappointed or find themselves in an unhealthy or dangerous situation. Before they leave, you could help them think about these issues, decide how they will determine if returning to their family isn’t working and what they will do if that is the case.
What stays or goes

Differences in expectations about what leaves with the young person can be particularly upsetting. If you bought a television for their bedroom, was it for them personally or was it intended for any foster children who stay with you? Are there any shared gifts that belong to the care leaver and others in the family? Are there items around the house the young person considers as theirs because they use them more than others?

Where items such as a bed, wardrobe, desk or doona have been purchased for their room using government monies, these belong to the young person. It’s a good idea to discuss what other items in their room such as rugs, lamps or chairs are theirs to take with them. Use birthdays and Christmases as opportunities to give them items to help with independent living such as a dinner set or saucepans.

Young people in care often have a special bond with pets and it may be devastating to them to have to leave a pet behind. On the other hand, they may want to take a pet with them but you think that where they will be living is unsuitable. Are you willing to look after the pet for them?

Positive and negative perceptions

Is the end of the placement being seen in a positive or negative way? You and the young person will probably see good and bad points about the end of the care order. For example, if they move out they will gain freedom and independence but take on extra responsibilities without always having you there for support.

Sometimes people focus more on what they will miss rather than what they are looking forward to. It often helps to discuss both the good and bad so you can acknowledge what you will miss but put it into perspective with all the positive points. In this way, you should be able to see that overall, the change is a positive one.

Carers related to the young person

Many of the issues in this section take on a special meaning for carers who are related to the young person and their birth family.

For example, feelings of rejection or abandonment at the end of a placement may be greater and expectations around post-care relationships will be different. The most difficult issue to deal with if you are related to the young person is likely to be if they have an unrealistic view of their birth family.

You may be uncomfortable discussing addiction, abuse or other issues with your niece or grandson when the person you are talking about is your sister, daughter or other close relative.

If you are seen as too critical, the young person may become defensive and turn against you. You will also need to consider that as an adult they have the right to make their own decisions. However, you will want to speak up if you think they will be putting themselves in danger or have unrealistic expectations of their ability to help their parent overcome their personal problems.