

Care leavers in Austria

by Hermann Radler

The situation in aftercare for children leaving youth care in Austria could be described in one sentence:

There is no mandate in the system of child and youth care to take care of young people after they reach the age of 18. The legislature assumes by reaching the age of 18 every young adult should be able to sustain him- or herself.

Just to give you a short overview I will give you some facts of the Austrian Child and youth welfare system:

In 2010 - 26.457 children and young people were supported throughout the child & youth care system in counseling. In addition 11 088 minors were taken under "full care" - that means the children left their origin family for foster care or residential care facilities.

Let me point out that the number of clients consuming educational support provided by the Austrian child and youth care system compared to the year 2009 has dropped by 3 Percent and the number for "full education care" increased by 4 percent.

I think this is very remarkable! In fact the policy makers in Austria have been trying to reduce the number of children in full care by increasing provision of so called mobile family services for years.

Those Mobile Services are a generic term for family support measures to avoid placement in a residential home.

The results of these statistical figures indicate the opposite effect and there is not an evidence based discussion about this facts going on.

But let me go back to the question what are we doing with care leavers in Austria.

As I told you before in 2010 11088 children were in full care in Austria. Approximately half of them were placed in foster care and the other half were placed in residential care homes.

11 088 children are 0.64 percent of all Austrian children aged up to 19.

The child and youth care system in Austria is only responsible for those up to 18. But in special cases an exception can be made. The number of those exceptions is:

881 young adults over 18 have been in the Austrian child and youth care system in 2010.

Before we go deeper into this I will explain what we define as a child, a minor and an adult:

The Austrian General Civil Code distinguishes four age groups:

From birth to the 7th Birthday one is a child,
from 7-14 years an underage minor,
from 14-18 years an mature minor

and with the 18th Birthday young people come of age.

So the Austrian youth welfare act is exclusively applicable for young people up to 18. But there is one chapter in this act which allows to extend the care up to the age of 21:

With the consent of the juvenile only, the support to education after reaching the age of majority may be continued until the age of 21, if this is necessary to ensure the success of previous measures.

So aftercare in Austria is mostly a voluntary service provided by residential care homes and foster parents more than a legal right of the clients in the residential youth welfare system.

Most of the registered residential care homes have developed their own support and preparation system for their clients achieving an independent state of living when they have to leave the youth welfare system. Those concepts are very similar.

For young people, moving out of their parents home and into their own flats is a challenge and a development step at the same time. For many years moving out was the first step to become an adult. Today, this has changed. Youth studies show that gradually young people have been moving out later and later. Often they stay at home until their midtwenties or even longer. One factor for this is the high cost of living, which many young people cannot afford.

Young people in alternative care are usually asked or even forced to start their independent life earlier. Officially, as I explained before, welfare authorities are responsible for children in alternative care until they reach full age. In Austria, the age of 18. If alternative care ends at this age, young people usually have two options: to move back to their biological family or to find their own living spaces. Sometimes there is a third option: If it is predictable that the child is not able to live independent, there is the possibility to transfer the child into the social welfare system for adults. This happens especially in cases where not only neglect was the reason for alternative care and circumstances like mental diseases and/or disabilities played a role.

Most of the operators of alternative care units are trying to act in a very responsible way in these matters. They support young people with growing up and and with becoming independent through very concrete measures or try to reintegrate the child into the original family before he or she reaches the age of 18.

Most oft those models offered by operators of alternative care are in three steps to prepare the young client for an independent living.

1. Support during the stay within the alternative care facilities:

In those facilities care is usually provided by social - pedagogues on 24 h/ 7days a week basis. The focus at this step is supporting school or vocational training and as well social – and life skills, including the development of self confidence as a pathway to independence.

2. Semi independent housing program:

Usually at the age of 16 the young person has the possibility to move to a special separate living space in the same building or just near of it. This step usually lasts another one or two years. During this period the young person should gain more life skills and psycho-social competencies. By teaching self development skills and the simultaneous reduction

of care units self organizing skills and independence grow.

3. Semi independent housing program outside of the care facility:

The last step for the young person is to move outside of the youth facility. The care of the social – pedagogues is reduced to a minimum. The goal is to integrate the young person into his new living environment.

These 3 steps are mostly seen as an option and not so much as a fixed scheme. What is important is that the appropriate steps are planned with the young person. Some clients stay very long – up to the maximum of 21 years in residential care facilities, - other are moving very quickly to an independent life.

But in my experience the greatest challenge in care after care is not providing living room or equipment. The big challenge is to install a stable situation where the young, now independent person can come back home and feel safe, - emotionally and physically, - after crises rose up in his independent life.

Looking back to 22 years I have worked in the field of residential care I realized that not all of our clients could be reintegrated to their families. Sometimes there is no family left or the violations were too severe that the young man or woman has no social support through a family behind him. The only social support system that he got to know was the residential care home where he or she grew up. So it comes that I have a lot of “foster children” coming back to our units to seek support and understanding. And the cases when they are in need are the same like in other families: children come back to their parents when they are in troubles and I think it is our responsibility to provide resources for that.

When I prepared this short presentation I searched all over to find some evidence data about care leavers in Austria. The data I found are very poor. But maybe we do not need data because the thing is very clear:

If young care leavers over 18 are supported the number of them who are capable of living independently will rise.

I believe all data can show only this truism. If you take a look at yourself – how do you or did it with your children I think you would come very rapidly to the conclusion that every child needs support, even when he is 18. And it ought to be logical that this parental knowledge should be used in residential care homes as well.

I think the discussion about what is good or not for care leavers is just the tip of an iceberg. And the iceberg is the big gap between reality and phantasy in our western society.

Youths today are thinking that as long as they have done something that adults do, they are considered as “big” boys and girls. They think that if they smoke or get drunk or have sex, they are independent enough. They think that if they are in a relationship, they are mature.

But that’s completely the opposite. We have to see beyond the normal course of things which society portrays to us. Maturity comes from feeling responsible as a person. Maturity is not about the age. It’s all about the acceptance of ones responsibility.

Let me illustrate it to you.

Let's say that we have a 14 year-old who has a broken family; his father left him, his mother and his 2 siblings. He's the eldest in the family. Since his dad is not around anymore, he helps take care of his siblings and his mom. He helps his siblings in their school work and even helps his mom with the things around the house.

On the other hand, we have a 40 year old man with a family to feed. He has 3 kids. He doesn't have any job. He gambles all the time. He comes home drunk and sometimes beats his wife and/or kids. In addition, though he is unemployed, he still has sex with his wife, making more babies.

Now let me ask you this question: Who is more mature of our two persons? The 14 year old boy or the 40 year old man?

I think you would agree with me, maturity is not about the age of the person. The 14 year old boy accepted his responsibility as the "man of the house" and really acts upon his responsibilities. On the other hand, the 40 year old man, can't accept his responsibility which consists of his whole family.

So I will end with the question - What makes us mature? We as professionals have to find an answer. This answer would also be the key to coping with the problems of care leavers. But it seems to me that we unlearned some very basic things of life:

Brains take time to finish developing. Remember yourself at 16, it took maybe 9 years before your brain was fully developed. Maybe at 16 your brain was 95% finished; but the last 5% is important and can't be rushed. What's developing at the age between 16 and 25 are the parts of the brain in the pre-frontal cortex that are most involved in what can be called mature thinking. But "maturity" doesn't just turn on at 25 when the brain hits a certain milestone.

What really makes us mature is experience. Life makes us mature. That's why some 18 year olds are so much more mature than other 18 year olds. It takes experience to mature, but it also takes self-management and a certain amount of self-reflection.

So if you want to do good work in a residential care home and provide mature grown ups to the society - the biggest challenge you have to do is to build up a secure and safe play field – a kind of a virtual reality, where children and young adults can make experiences - good or bad ones.