

Assisting Youth Leaving Care: Understanding Udayan Care's Aftercare Programme through the Prism of Ecological Systems Theory

Kiran Modi, Archana Prasad, Jyoti Mishra

Abstract

Udayan Care's aftercare programme for youth is designed to support the transition of young adults leaving the umbrella of the Udayan Care Ghars (Sunshine Homes) to independent and self-reliant living. The objective of this research is to understand the aftercare programme by applying the ecological systems theory of human development formulated by Bronfenbrenner (1979). The study focuses on eight analytical domains that are important for transition of youth namely education and employment, financial management, mental and physical health, legal rights and responsibilities, housing, goals and aspirations, safety and emergency skills, and resilience. It covered 60 youth who are either presently covered under aftercare programme or are Udayan Care alumni who have already availed the organisation's aftercare support. The life experiences of youth have been presented through five ecological systems namely microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem and chronosystem. The analysis highlights the contributions of multiple stakeholders to the efficacy of the ecological systems. While the success of aftercare programme of Udayan Care is evident in many domains, there are challenges that still exist in regard to building resilience.

Keywords

Aftercare, youth, child and youth care, resilience, ecological systems

Article history

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Introduction

Aftercare programmes are gaining increasing salience in the lexicon of child care as they are fundamentally linked to the social reintegration and rehabilitation of vulnerable children who cannot be left uncared for after they leave childcare settings. Adolescence is a pivotal period of a person's life during which young adults can either consolidate or lose the lessons they learn during childhood. This is significant in a country like India where the law allows care of children in a child care institution only up to the age of 18 years, after which the phase of aftercare commences. According to Section 2(5) of the Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection of Children) Act 2015, aftercare support in India is provided to persons in the age group of 18 to under 21 years who 'have left any institutional care to join the mainstream of the society'. In the absence of support from their birth families, the vulnerability of children under alternative care persists after they enter this new phase of life. They face several challenges such as lack of economic independence, physical and mental illness, inadequate life skills and homelessness (Chopra, 2015, Modi, Sachdev and Prasad, 2016). Research indicates that the transition from childhood to adulthood is a complicated process as it requires them to perform new roles, learn new skills and cope with biological changes (Modi, Nayar-Akhtar, Ariely and Gupta, 2016). Unless these challenges are adequately addressed, youth may find themselves in further critical situations after leaving care. Hence, continuity of care is a necessity for youth to become socially integrated (Udayan Care, 2014).

Udayan care's aftercare programme

Youth covered under Udayan Care's aftercare programme lived in different residential child care facilities of the organisation. The child care model of Udayan Care focuses on long term residential care of orphaned and abandoned children over the age of six years in the 'L.I.F.E. Udayan Ghars' or 'Sunshine Homes'. Each LIFE ('Living In Family Environment') Udayan Ghar is located in a community setting of a middle-class neighbourhood, and houses a maximum of 12 children of the same gender. Each home has a Carer Team consisting of mentor parents (lifetime volunteers), caregivers, social workers, and support staff. The mentor mother or mentor father is the backbone of each Udayan Ghar as they are socially committed people who voluntarily decide to become carers for all the children in a particular home for their entire lifetime. Additionally, there is a Mental Health Group consisting of psychiatrists, psychologists and counsellors who address mental health challenges faced by children.

A strong sense of bonding is fostered between all the children at the Ghars with their mentor parents, carer team and siblings. During festivals, they come together and celebrate with a familial spirit, where even the alumni join them. The LIFE strategy helps by applying attachment and trauma-based understanding to childcare while using positive psychological tools to encourage resilience and developmental growth. Throughout the period of care, children are prepared for self-reliance, and integrated in the community through the acquisition of social and life skills. From the age of 14, adolescents are encouraged to take part in aftercare planning.

Under its aftercare programme, Udayan Care provides financial and non-financial support to youth in multiple domains like accommodation, education and health care. Individual care plans are developed with active participation of children. Aftercare support continues beyond the statutory limit, if necessary, until the youth are completely settled. The relationships with the carer team, mental health group and house siblings, however, continue long after they start living independently. In addition, Udayan Care provides a variety of other aftercare facilities; youth are encouraged to initially engage in part-time jobs and manage an independent kitchen so that they can acquire necessary life skills for leading independent lives. Finally, the mentor parents play a continuing support role in successful implementation of the aftercare programme.

By facilitating their systematic, focused and need-based interaction with stakeholders in the larger societal environment which include, inter alia, institutions of higher and technical education, employers, service providers and the civil society in general, the aftercare programme allows youth to continuously expand their societal space leading to their independence.

The ecological systems theory

Ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) states that a person's development is influenced by the environment or ecology in which human interactions take place. The ecology is not a uniform whole, but has five socially organised interconnected ecological systems, as noted below, that shape human development.

Microsystem is the immediate surroundings in which direct interactions take place. It is the environment closest to the person, and in which participation is direct.

Mesosystem is built on the linkages and processes between two or more actors or institutions in a person's microsystem. It shows the interactions that take place among various components of the microsystem which do not function independently but are interconnected, and influence the person's development.

Exosystem is the linkages and processes that take place between two or more settings which are external to the person. Unlike the mesosystem, the person in the exosystem is not present in all or at least one of the settings, but the events happening in any or all of these settings affect the person anyway.

Macrosystem refers to the social and cultural context in which the person lives and grows, and includes the social system, norms and values of culture and sub-culture, the economic system, legal system, ideologies and the political system.

Chronosystem is the outermost circle and it includes the changes in the conditions and environment of a person that occur over a period of time.

Rationale and objective of research

The objective of the present research is to understand the efficacy of the aftercare programme of Udayan Care and the development of young adults, which the aftercare programme has ensured, through the prism of ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). In other words, the ecological systems

theory has been used as a tool for comprehending the life of aftercare youth. This has been done by analysing eight key aspects of life namely education and employment, financial management, mental and physical health, legal rights and responsibilities, housing, goals and aspirations, safety and emergency skills, and resilience.

Methodology

The research was conducted with the help of an exploratory survey covering the eight aspects of life noted above. Quantitative and qualitative data was collected through interviews of youth who are covered under Udayan Care's aftercare programme. Interviews were conducted with the help of two structured interview schedules having both open and close-ended questions with focus on the eight aspects of life. While one interview schedule dealt with resilience of youth using a five-point Likert Scale to measure attitudes or opinions (Bowling, 1997); the remaining seven components were covered under the second interview schedule. Resilience of youth has been analysed under three analytical categories namely 'sense of mastery', 'sense of relatedness' and 'emotionality'.

The survey covered 60 youth — 36 females and 24 males in the age group of 18 to 32 years. The respondents were selected randomly from amongst the youth who are presently covered under the aftercare programme of Udayan Care as well as the alumni. Following completion of data collection, each interview schedule was subjected to scrutiny in order to find out and rectify omissions, inaccuracies and inconsistencies in data. Thereafter, data was analysed with the

help of Statistical Package for Social Sciences, which resulted in calculations of frequencies and percentages.

The research was conducted in conformity with internationally recognised ethical guidelines prepared for the purpose by Udayan Care. Prior to data collection, written and informed consent of each youth for participation in the survey was obtained. The participants were briefed about the research, including its objectives and rationale. Besides maintaining confidentiality and anonymity of youth, none of the respondents was put under any emotional and psychological stress during the process of conducting interviews.

Analysis of aftercare programme through the prism of ecological systems theory

The actors and institutions with whom the youth interact while performing various activities were identified in order to build an appropriate model of ecological systems for aftercare youth, as presented below in Diagram 1. This also facilitated interpretation of research findings under eight areas of analysis.

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THE ECOLOGICAL SYSTEMS THEORY

Formulated by noted American psychologist Urie Bronfenbrenner, the ecological systems theory states that a person's development is influenced by the environment or ecology in which human interactions take place. The ecology has five socially organized interconnected ecological systems, as shown below, which shape human development.

The following diagram shows the various actors and institutions that form part of the ecology system and contribute to the system's dynamic development of the youth during aftercare.

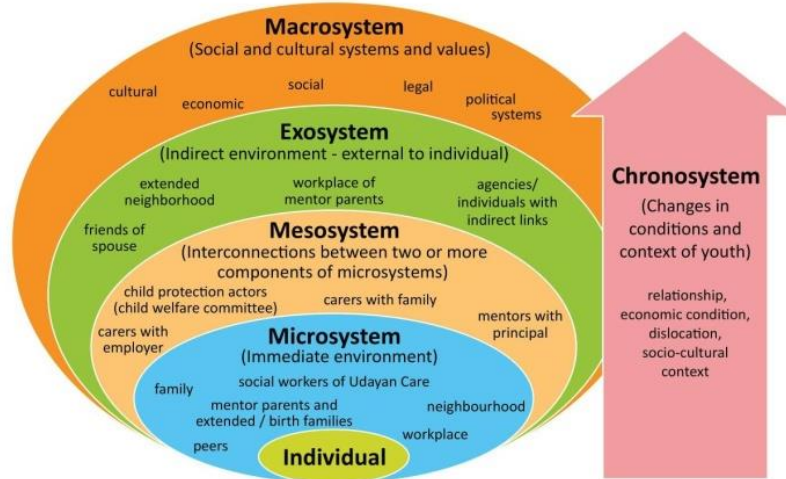


Diagram 1: Concerned Actors & influencers for Udayan Care aftercare youth under the Ecological Model

The results of interactions with youth have been presented below under the five ecological systems of the ecological systems theory.

Microsystem:

Analysis of the dynamics of the microsystem reveals the nature of proximal processes and achievements of youth in various domains, as noted below.

1. **Education and Employment:** While 93% youth have completed secondary level education, 78% have studied higher secondary and 63% are either Graduates or are pursuing their Graduation.

A strong orientation towards education is noticed among youth as 83% expressed their desire to study further. Significantly, 87% have undergone additional training with Udayan Care, which is indicative of a strong microsystem. Guidance of tutors and mentor parents, which has helped them overcome learning barriers during school days, continues under the

aftercare support through training on soft skills, career counselling and support to strengthen employability. While 11% youth are already employed, 89% have prepared their resumes with assistance from the carer team and 80% have a clear understanding of the profession they would like to pursue.

Along with access to internet which is a technical source of information, the youth's level of interaction with mentor parents, caregivers, peers and volunteers, who are the key micro-system actors, is high.

2. **Financial Management:** While money is provided by the organisation, assistance in financial management is mostly (63%) provided by mentor parents, followed by social workers (33%) and other caregivers. Some of the youth are engaged in part-time jobs and internships, which may indicate the role of employers as an actor in the microsystem.
3. **Mental and Physical Health:** The need for emotional support is felt more by the youth after they leave the Sunshine Homes. Among the microsystem actors with whom they interact in times of need for emotional support, the mentor parents are the first choice followed by members of care team. Help is also received from other actors like co-workers and friends, and on occasion by mental health specialists.

In regard to their physical health needs, the youth seek assistance of carer team, siblings, friends, teachers and colleagues. These people also help them acquire knowledge of healthcare. The youth also participate in workshops and consult newspapers, television and internet for acquiring

lessons on healthcare. Youth are aware of first aid procedures for cuts and wounds (97%), the common cold (93%), burns (83 %), bee or insect bites (74%), fractures (43%) and drowning (50%), government health programmes (48%) and personal medical history (83%).

4. **Legal Rights and Responsibilities:** Apart from the internet, newspapers and media youth have learnt about their legal rights and responsibilities from the carer team, friends, colleagues, siblings, volunteers and teachers in school. The effectiveness of these sources in the microsystem could be ascertained from the following research findings: 97% youth possess proof of identity, 80% are aware of their right to vote, 40% know the legal age of marriage for boys, 62% know the legal age of marriage for girls, 90% know the legal age for driving, and 97% understand the importance of legal rights and responsibilities.
5. **Housing:** Udayan Care supports the youth with leaving grant and household material, and assists them in making sound decisions regarding housing. The youth are also aware of the importance of sanitation, water supply, safety and utilities while getting a house on rent or starting independent living. The study found that the young adults have learnt different aspects of managing household affairs such as cooking, cleaning and paying bills from various actors in the microsystem like mentor parents, friends, siblings and other relatives.
6. **Goals and Aspirations:** As a microsystem actor, the carer team in general and the mentor parents in particular have contributed to the process of

shaping the goals and aspirations of youth. The young adults expressed their desire to complete education, enter into professions, be successful in life, and be good human beings. They further emphasised the role of mentor parents in addressing the challenges that they faced in achieving their goals and aspirations.

7. **Safety and Emergency Skills:** Lessons on safety and emergency skills are imparted to children and youth to equip them with skills for facing challenges effectively. Most of them shared their knowledge of drill procedures and precautions during flood, fire, earthquake and terrorist attack and are aware about different helpline numbers for emergency services.

Mesosystem: The study revealed that the mentor parents and carer team at Udayan Care perform multiple roles for the benefits of the youth. Interviewees stated that they often interact with principals and teachers of academic institutions, their employers, and co-residents in the neighbourhood where the aftercare facility is located or where the youth reside in rented accommodation. This helps the settlement process, and gives them a sense of belonging in the community. Interactions also take place between carers of Udayan Care, their peers in educational institutions and workplace, friends, volunteers, healthcare facility, and educational and vocational institutions which help the youth in multiple ways like finding accommodation, getting into employment, and managing critical situations of life.

Exosystem: Interviewees find the family of mentor parents a big source of support. As a result of high degree of attachment between the mentor parents and the youth, the family members of the mentor parents often get involved in the growth and development of the youth and contribute by complementing the work of the mentor parents.

Macrosystem: The survey showed that in their entire journey from care at Udayan Care to independence, the youth are always exposed to a society that is generally peaceful, law-abiding and caring. The residential homes are located in middle-class localities or residential facilities which provide more opportunities for self-growth than scope for deviant action. They interact with other people in the neighbourhood or institution during family or social events, and get many other opportunities for interactions which contribute to their inclusive development.

Chronosystem: Certain changes in the conditions and context of youth occur over a period of time and some notable changes that form the chronosystem are in regard to residential accommodation, employment and the progressive journey of youth from one phase of life to another.

Presently, 46% youth live in aftercare facilities, 52% live in rented housing and almost 2% stay in hostels of their educational institutes with support from Udayan Care. This is a significant change in the life of youth who as children have faced situations like homelessness, destitution and deprivation.

Regarding employment, the change is evident; 11% youth are currently employed, and believe that it will make them independent and confident. For

those youth on the verge of employment, there is a great deal of clarity among them regarding the kind of profession they would like to pursue, and their level of preparedness for employment is also high. The progressive journey of the youth, from the status of a child in need of care and protection to an adult who is self-reliant and independent, presents a positive picture of the chronosystem and is shown in the diagram below.

Diagram 2: Progressive journey of aftercare youth since childhood



Ecological Systems and Resilience

The issue of resilience is presented separately, as all the five ecological systems advocated by Bronfenbrenner collectively contribute to the development of resilience in youth.

In the literature of psychology, resilience is defined 'in terms of an individual's capacity, the process he or she goes through, and the result' (Masten, Best and Garmezy, 1990). It refers to 'the process of effectively mobilizing internal and external resources in adapting to or managing significant sources of stress or trauma' (Lee, Cheung and Kwong, 2012). For the purpose of analyzing resilience of aftercare youth; three broad analytical categories were used. These were 'sense of mastery', 'sense of relatedness' and 'emotionality'.

- **Sense of Mastery:** The study used eight indicators to measure the sense of mastery of youth: (1) thinking of more than one way to solve a problem, (2) confidence in ability of self to take charge, (3) adaptability to change, (4) enjoy solving difficult problems, (5) setting clear objectives for self, (6) positive thinking about correctness of things, (7) can control what happens to self, and (8) can let others help him/her in times of need. The study found that majority of youth display a sense of mastery in regard to their ability to solve problems, positive thinking about self and willingness to receive help from others in times of need.

While 72% of youth have confidence in adjusting to change, around 28% could not formulate an opinion in regard to the eight indicators. Most youth disagreed with two indicators namely 'enjoy solving difficult problems' and 'setting clear objectives for self.'

Chart 1: I can think of more than one way to solve a problem

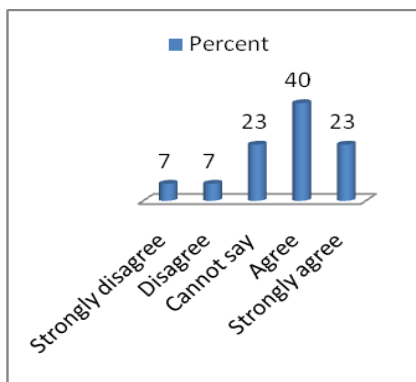


Chart 5: I can easily adjust to change

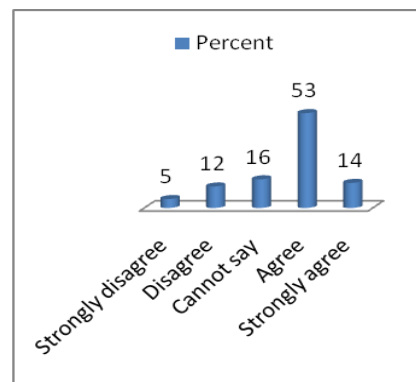


Chart 2: I enjoy solving difficult problems

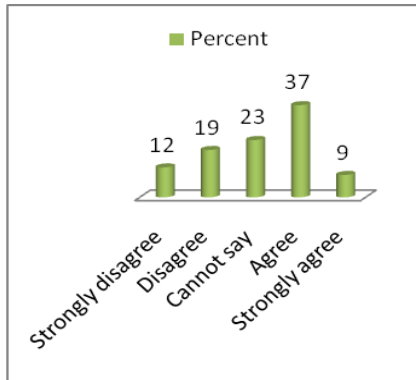


Chart 6: No matter what happens, things will be all right

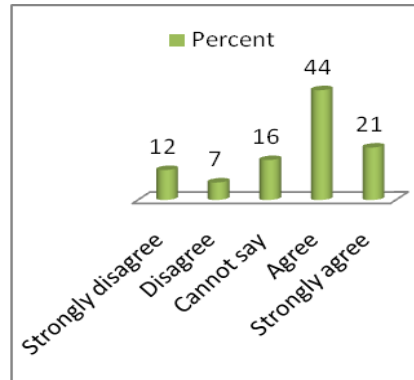


Chart 3: I am confident in my ability to take charge

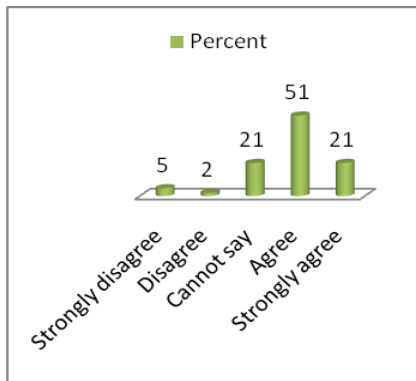


Chart 7: I can control what happens to me

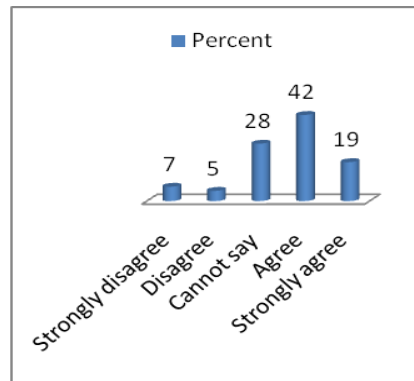


Chart 4: I set clear objectives for myself

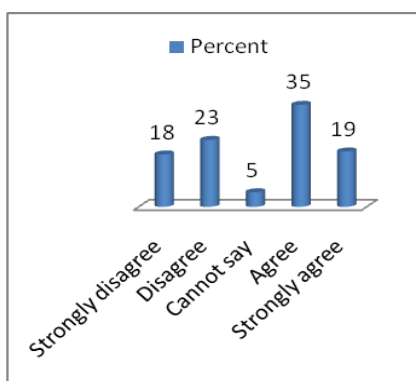
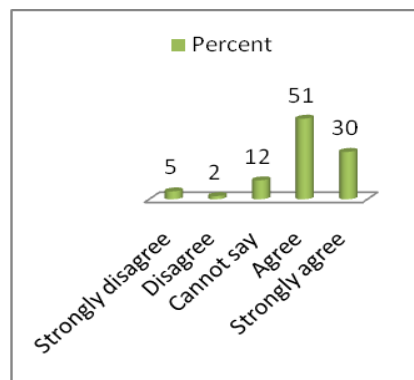


Chart 8: I can let others help me when I need to



- Sense of Relatedness: Sense of relatedness deals with the interpersonal relationships of youth with the help of eight indicators: (1) youth can make friends easily, (2) can tell a friend if the friend does something hurtful, (3) can forgive even if let down by someone, (4) can trust others, (5) can

depend on the closest person to do something right, (6) can easily share feelings, (7) comforted by people when youth is upset, and (8) youth has a best friend.

Apart from one indicator - 'youth can trust others' (40%), respondents who either agreed or strongly agreed with the indicators is in the range of 58% to 70%. This is indicative of the high degree of resilience of youth in regard to the sense of relatedness. However, a deficiency in trust in others was observed, as nearly one-third of the youth expressed this feeling by either disagreeing or strongly disagreeing with the concerned indicators like youth can trust others (28%), can depend on the closest person to do something right (31%), and can easily share feelings (28%).

Chart 9: I can make friends easily

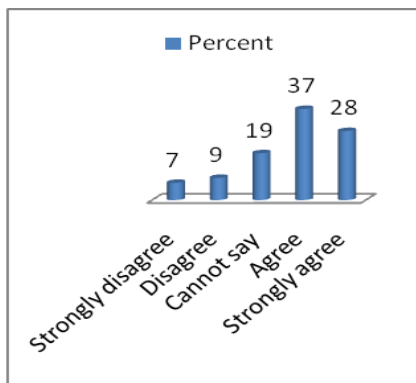


Chart 13: If people let me down, I can forgive them

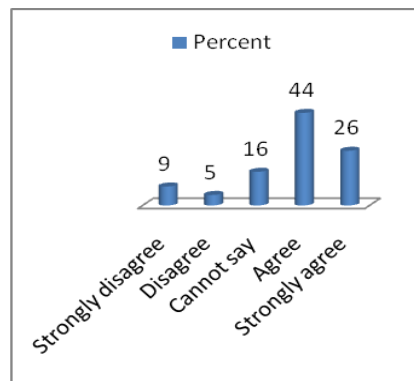


Chart 10: I can trust others

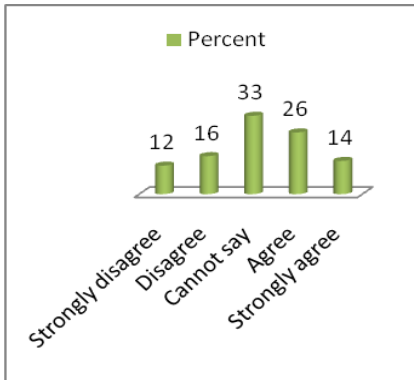


Chart 14: I can share my feelings easily

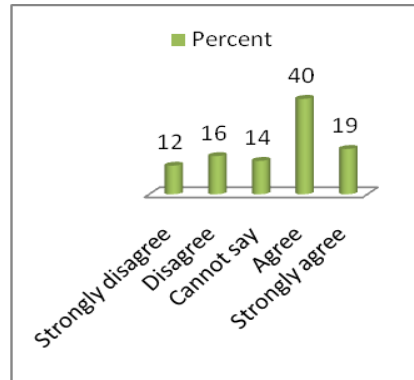


Chart 11: I can calmly tell a friend if he or she does something that hurts me

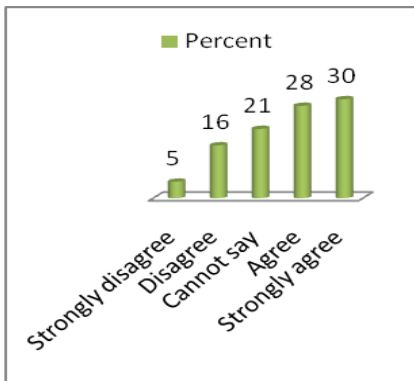


Chart 15: People comfort me when I'm upset

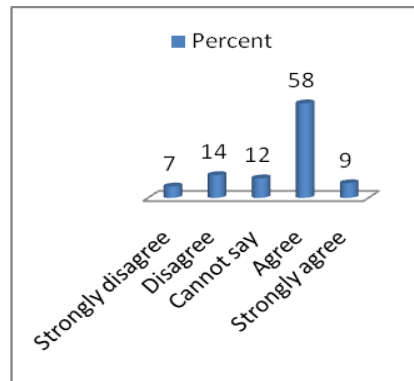


Chart 12: I can depend on those closest to me to do the right thing

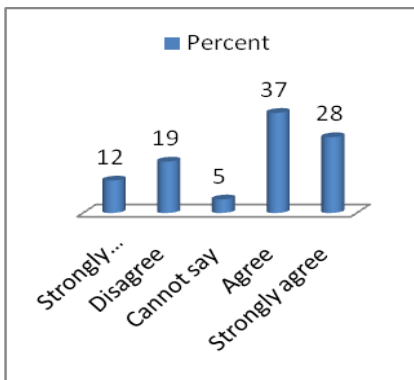
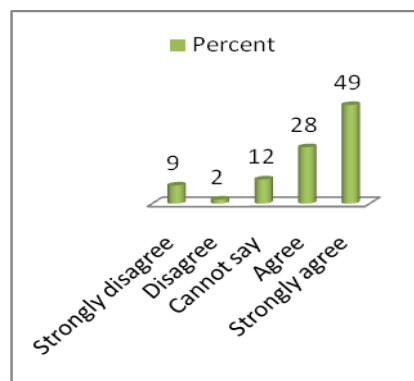


Chart 16: I have a best friend



- Emotionality: Emotionality was explored through eight statements: (1) aware of emotions of self, (3) face a hard time passing through stressful events, (3) finding it hard to bounce back when something bad happens, (4) panic a lot under pressure, (5) youth is easy to get upset according to

people, (6) make mistakes when upset, (7) upset state of mind continues for several days, and (8) react without thinking when upset. While 70% youth are aware of their emotions, there are many emotional challenges in real life situations. The number of youth who find it hard to face stressful events and to bounce back from a bad situation are 56% and 49% respectively, while 63% panic under pressure, 56% commit mistakes when they are upset, 51% remain upset for several days, and 44% react without thinking while upset.

There are youth who expressed strong emotionality like those who do not react without thinking (30%), do not remain upset for several days (33%), and do not commit mistakes while upset (18%).

Chart 17: I'm aware of my emotions

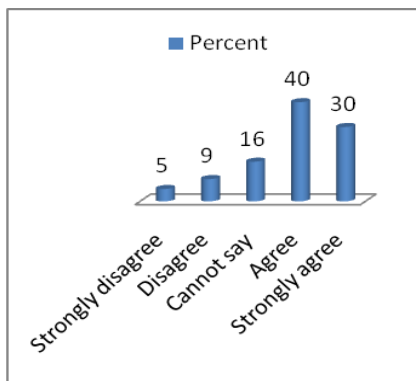


Chart 21: It is hard for me to bounce back when something bad happens

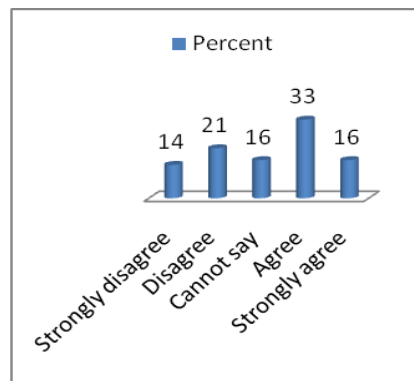


Chart 18: I panic a lot under pressure

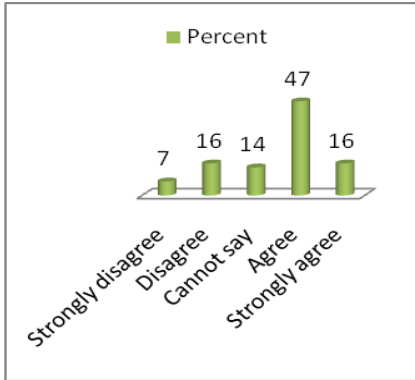


Chart 22: When I am upset, I make mistakes

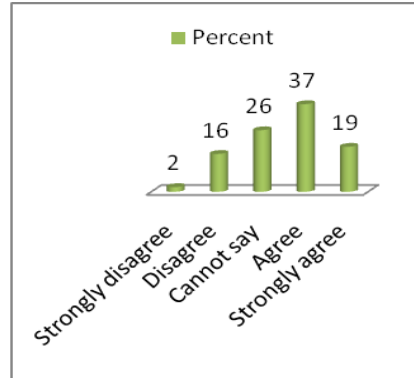


Chart 19: I have a hard time making it through stressful events

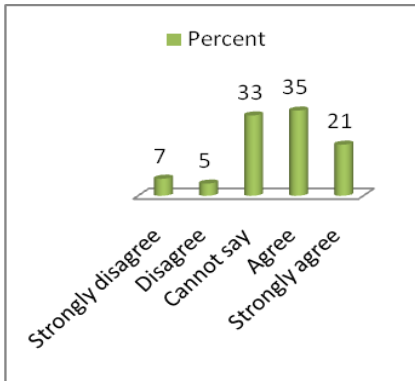


Chart 23: When I get upset, I'm still upset for several days

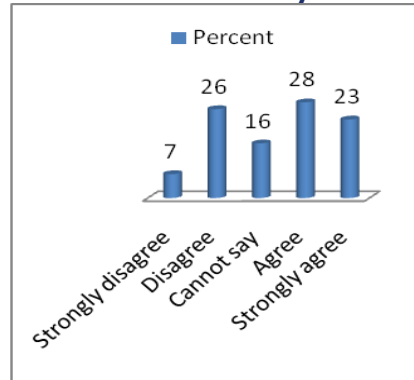


Chart 20: People say I am easy to upset

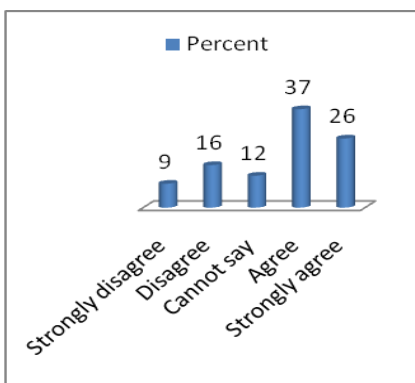
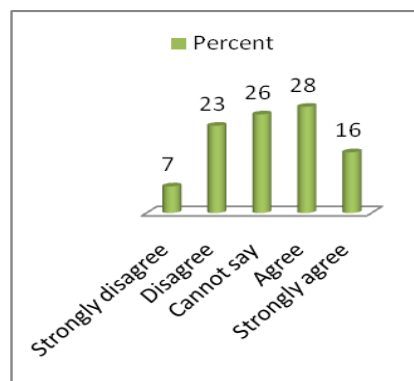


Chart 24: When I get upset, I react without thinking



The study attempted to identify the people from whom the youth seek help while in difficulties. While 56% seek help from mentor parents, 49% do so from other members of the carer team and only 7% seek support of their teachers.

Conclusions

This study elicits understanding of the contributions of multiple stakeholders to vibrancy and effectiveness of the ecological systems that form part of the life of youth in transition. Each of the ecological systems has a distinct role in the life of a youth in the eight specific domains of the study. The findings of the research highlight the importance of the current living environment at Udayan Care, and the kind of aftercare intervention provided, namely, mentor parents as lifetime volunteers, long term attachment and emotional bonding with mentors and other residents. It is suggested that all of this, plus the continuum of care contribute to the social reintegration and relationship with youth when they start living independently on their own.

This becomes more pertinent if understood in the backdrop of the fact that most children who enter the care system of Udayan Care have experienced severe deprivation and trauma. Such children do not belong to any particular caste or creed, but share common issues and challenges. They lack any exposure to basic life or social skills, and are often first generation school attendees. The study demonstrates the importance of having a person in their life who they can depend on and trust. These figures of attachment, built through long term relationship, go a long way in building their confidence and level of resilience.

Being a dynamic process, it is not uncommon to see challenges in administering child and youth care programme. The needs of children and youth change often and caregivers have to be responsive to such changing needs. The study showed that in the domain of resilience, many young adults continue to feel stress for several days after meeting challenging situations, and the incidence of depression is found to be quite high in many of them. The youth often show signs of weak resilience such as inability to think of multiple ways for solving problems or lack of confidence in their own ability to take charge of situations. While this is understandable given the past traumatic and negative experiences they have had in their early years as children, these findings of research offer an opportunity to the organisation to further work on these issues and address the challenges for the improvement of children's lives as they move into adulthood. Thus, the effort to continuously review and keep updating the knowledge on concepts and techniques of mental health care continue as a priority in the organisation.

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