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I Wanted to Be Able to Stand on My Own Two Feet First—Younger Parents Exiting Homelessness and Care and Their Aspirations

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative study examines the aspirations, motivations and support needs of 15 young parents in South Australia with experiences of out-of-home care (OOHC) or homelessness. Most participants aimed to delay parenting to achieve financial stability, education and personal development, but faced unplanned pregnancies due to inadequate access to sexual health education and contraception. The study emphasises the importance of trauma-informed, strengths-based approaches, highlighting the need for stable housing, mental health services, and flexible education and employment opportunities. Participants valued peer-led programmes and inclusive policies that recognise their lived experiences. The findings underscore the resilience of these younger parents and the need for targeted interventions to break cycles of adversity. This research contributes to the evidence base for policies that empower young people in care and homelessness systems, fostering better long-term outcomes for them and their children. This study underscores the critical need for trauma-informed, strengths-based interventions that address the unique challenges faced by young parents transitioning from OOHC or homelessness. By informing policies focused on housing stability, tailored education and inclusive support systems, these findings aim to empower young people to break cycles of adversity and achieve long-term positive outcomes.

1 | Background

Young people with out-of-home care (OOHC) experience or difficult childhoods are more likely to become parents earlier than their peers (Arney et al. 2018; Eastman et al. 2019; Roberts 2021). While the average age for first-time mothers in Australia is 29.4 years (AIHW 2021), those who have faced adversity or have OOHC backgrounds tend to have children younger and face greater challenges (AIHW 2021; Hoffmann et al. 2019).

Younger parents, defined as those under 25 at the birth of their first child, often experience child protection interventions (Armfield et al. 2021; Shpiegel et al. 2022). Australian research shows that most families with multiple child protection reports

had parents who were under 20 at their first pregnancy (Arney et al. 2018). These parents often come from backgrounds of violence and neglect, leading to intergenerational cycles of abuse (Assink et al. 2018). Despite this, many young parents are capable of meeting their children's needs (Conn et al. 2018; Roberts 2021). However, early motherhood is often linked to socioeconomic disadvantages like incomplete education, financial insecurity, and housing instability (Conn et al. 2018; Eastman et al. 2019; Gill et al. 2020). Younger parents, particularly those with OOHC experiences, often feel judged and face barriers to support (Gill et al. 2020; Mnissak et al. 2020; Purtell et al. 2022). Cultural views on 'good' and 'bad' parenting and the perceived inevitability of intergenerational child removal influence how they are supported (Rutman et al. 2002).

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To address these issues, governments have implemented policies to delay parenting for those not yet ready to assume parental responsibility, based on the belief that delaying pregnancy is protective (Butler et al. 2010; Dworsky 2015; Michell and Scalzi 2016; Purtell et al. 2022). Advocates argue that young people with aspirations, such as goals related to work or education, are more likely to prevent unwanted pregnancy and achieve better outcomes (Dixon 2014). Aspirations can be protective, motivating young people to delay parenting (Barn and Mantovani 2005). Conversely, mental health issues, unresolved trauma and limited opportunities increase the risk of early parenting (Purtell et al. 2020; Winter et al. 2016).

1.1 | Aspirations

Research, in Australia and abroad, has suggested that one way to temper aspirations towards younger parenting and, to improve outcomes more broadly, is to help young people to develop goals and strategies to develop and achieve other goals (Dunne 2025; Michell and Scalzi 2016; Noble-Carr and Woodman 2018). Aspirations can serve as a protective factor for at-risk young people, particularly those experiencing homelessness or involvement in care systems (Southgate et al. 2015; Michell and Scalzi 2016). Research shows that young people in such contexts often experience instability, disadvantage, and neglect, which contribute to their lower aspirations. This lack of aspiration can heighten vulnerability, leading to disengagement from school, limited future planning, and increased risk-taking behaviour, as young people may feel they have little to lose (Saarikkomaki and Kivivuori 2013).

Conversely, the formation of aspirations during adolescence—especially during key transition periods—can prompt goal-setting and a more hopeful orientation towards the future (Beal and Crockett 2010).

Aspirations are not limited to education and employment, but may also encompass emotional wellbeing, social relationships and a sense of purpose (Rothon et al. 2011; Rainford 2023). Studies show that young people from supportive, resource-rich environments tend to have higher aspirations (Scott et al. 2007; Sawitri and Creed 2015). Therefore, fostering aspirations among at-risk young people is essential for promoting resilience, strengthening motivation and improving long-term outcomes. Australian research on the aspirations of vulnerable younger parents is limited. One study with young Aboriginal women and men found that most did not want to become teenage parents but idealised raising a child (Larkins et al. 2011). Other research has focused on young parents' aspirations post-birth rather than exploring their initial aspirations (Purtell et al. 2020) and have provided an account of their parenting experiences more broadly (AIHW 2024; Gill et al. 2020; Purtell et al. 2022).

In 2022, given a rising number of young people becoming parents whilst in or shortly after leaving care, the South Australian Department of Human Services' Early Intervention Research Directorate commissioned a study to inform policy by exploring the experiences of young people who had experienced OOHC or homelessness and had become parents before turning 25. It built on a previous study which engaged young people who were not yet parents (McDougall et al. 2023) and was guided by several

research questions, including: What are the broad aspirations of younger parents, and what had been their specific aspirations related to parenting? What influences young people's aspirations for parenting? What are the implications for policy and practice?

This paper provides an overview of the major themes emerging from interviews with fifteen younger parents who participated in the study, exploring the aspirations of young people who are transitioning from Out of Home Care or homelessness services. The purpose of the project, was to understand whether broad aspirations affected young people's pathways to pregnancy and, if so, what might be the implications for interventions to delay pregnancy among vulnerable cohorts of young people. This paper provides our findings and young people's views on how they might influence policy and practice.

2 | Context

This study was conducted in South Australia, focusing on participants from the Out of Home Care (OOHC) and homelessness sectors. OOHC in South Australia is provided to children and young people who cannot live with their biological parents and are under state guardianship. In 2020, 4136 children and young people were in OOHC (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2021). Many of these children have experienced emotional and physical abuse, neglect, and other adverse childhood experiences, including family and domestic violence and sexual abuse. Most live with foster or kinship carers, but some are placed in residential care facilities, where they are cared for by paid staff along with other children or young people.

Recognising the challenges faced by young people transitioning from care to independence, South Australia offers post-care services to support them (see: Mendes et al. 2025 for more detail). Despite these efforts, up to 50% of young Australians who have lived in OOHC become homeless within four years of leaving care (Martin et al. 2021).

In addition, some South Australian young people aged 15–25 receive support from the homelessness sector, which is primarily composed of non-government service providers. In 2018–19, over 1000 young people were assisted by homelessness services in South Australia (Flavel et al. 2021). These young individuals often face early childhood adversity, strained family relationships, or ongoing safety issues that make living at home unsafe. Many young people who have experienced homeless have also brushed up against or spent time in the child protection and out of home care systems.

3 | Our Approach

3.1 | Co-Reflexivity

3.1.1 | Ethical Considerations and Practices

Ethical approval [2021-HRE00050] was obtained from the University of South Australia and ratified by the Australian Catholic University, with additional approvals from the Department for Child Protection (SA) for co-consent for young

people under guardianship. Approval was granted to waive the requirement for parental consent as participants were not living with or under the guardianship of a parent.

A comprehensive risk-management protocol was implemented to ensure the safe participation of young people in the study. This included a youth-friendly consent process clarifying involvement, identity protection, researchers' responsibilities, withdrawal rights, and use of their input. A screening tool identified participants facing challenges impacting their ability to participate without distress, allowing them to postpone or withdraw. Participants could also have a support person, such as a worker or advocate, present during interviews.

3.1.2 | Positionality and Co-Reflexivity

The study was completed by author one and a research assistant and drew on a linked study with young people who were not yet parents that was informed by a Lived Experience Advisory Group (LEAG). Author One, a former youth worker with experience in 35 studies involving young people in care, acknowledges his perspective as an advocate and collaborator. Author Two, leading the linked study, is an experienced child protection researcher focused on improving practices for children and youth. Both authors recognised their proximity to the topic and participants, addressing potential misinterpretation through reflexive activities.

The study embraced co-reflexivity, enabling researchers and participants to reflect on how the research was conducted, including assumptions about young people with adverse childhood experiences (Moore et al. 2016). Researchers reviewed interview transcripts to understand meanings and nuances, ensuring the well-being of both researchers and participants. At a 'member-checking workshop', a group of six participants were also involved in co-reflection, shaping our language and ensuring that our interpretations were accurate (Moore et al. 2016).

3.1.3 | Participants

Fifteen young people participated in the study, including 11 young mothers and 4 young fathers, all aged between 16 and 24. The young fathers were all partnered with the participating young mothers. Three of the young people identified as culturally or linguistically diverse, and two as Aboriginal. Five of the young people had transitioned from out of home care while an additional four had spent some time on child protection orders (Table 1).

Young people were recruited through non-government agencies providing OOH and homelessness services. They were provided information about the project and invited to meet with a researcher to discuss their involvement. If willing, they completed a consent form and were contacted to organise a time and place to meet. Interviews were developed to understand younger parents' aspirations, including towards parenting. They were conducted between February and October 2022. Due to COVID-19 travel restrictions, interviews were conducted online or by phone. Interviews lasted between 60 and 90 min, typically one-on-one, although some participants had a partner present. Participants were informed that if they participated in the study

TABLE 1 | Demographics of young participants.

	<i>n</i> = 15
Gender	
Female	11
Male	3
Non-binary	1
Cultural background	
Culturally or linguistically diverse	3
Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander	2
Age	
Under 18	2
Over 18	13

they would receive a \$50 gift voucher. On the day of the proposed interview they were then given the voucher and told that they could keep it regardless of whether they decided to complete an interview or not.

3.1.4 | Nature of Interviews and Workshop With Young People

As illustrated in Figure 1, in this study we met with young people to talk about the study and their involvement, conducted interviews that included a short survey, offered debriefing sessions and hosted a workshop.

Before each interview, the interviewer reviewed the consent form with participants and conducted a brief screening for potential mental health concerns or stressors.

For the purpose of interviews, a semi-structured schedule was created to address the research questions. The interviews consisted of six key sections:

1. Biography and overview of childhood experiences
2. Ranking task to explore young people's aspirations
3. Discussion about aspirations towards parenting and influencing factors
4. Consideration of ways that the system might help them achieve their goals
5. Experiences and 'pathway to parenting'
6. Aspirations for themselves and their children

This paper focuses on questions one to four. Questions 5 and 6 will be answered elsewhere. We will discuss the findings related to Question 5 and 6 elsewhere, including the relationships that parents had with their children and their goals for themselves and their children in the future.

At the conclusion of interviews, participants reflected on their experience and completed a short questionnaire. This

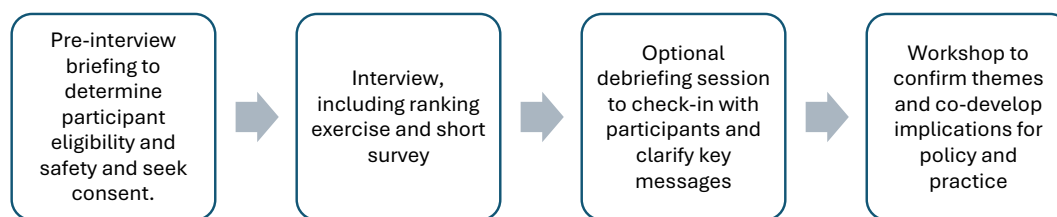


FIGURE 1 | Research activities.

questionnaire, adapted from Finkelhor and colleagues (2014), asked if it was important for young people to participate in such research, how safe and comfortable they felt during the interview, if they experienced any distress, and if they would participate again knowing the content of the interview. Some young people also took up the option to have a debriefing session where researchers ‘checked in’ and worked with participants to determine the ‘key messages’ arising from their interviews.

A group workshop was conducted in January after all interviews were completed and analysis had occurred. All participants in the study were invited to attend and were offered to be reimbursed for their time (i.e., they received vouchers, we paid for transport and offered to cover the costs of childcare). Six younger parents (including 3 mothers and 3 fathers) member-checked and confirmed our interpretations, considered our findings and helped us propose implications for policy and practice.

3.1.5 | Analysis

Interviews and focus groups were audio-recorded with participants’ consent and transcribed verbatim. Identifying information was removed before analysis. Field notes were taken during interviews, capturing responses to ranking items and mind-maps related to parenting. Transcripts and notes were imported into NVivo 12 Pro for analysis.

The research teams followed Braun and Clarke’s (2021) thematic analysis approach, analysing transcripts both inductively to uncover shared experiences and views, and deductively to explore the nature of aspirations and pathways to parenting (findings from the latter will be reported elsewhere). The codes were tested with workshop participants who helped researchers better understand their experiences.

Quotes in this paper illustrate both shared views and diverse experiences among participants. Each quote is labelled to identify the parental role of the participant (YM—young mother; YF—young father) alongside their age, and a unique participant number, for example YM2_20.

4 | Findings

4.1 | Question 1: Childhood Experiences

Young people were asked about their own childhood experiences and their experience in the care and homelessness systems. Many participants discussed their childhood experiences

as well as their current living conditions and their experiences within care or youth services.

Young people often talked about experiences of maltreatment (namely physical and sexual abuse or neglect); problems that their parents faced that affected their capacity to parent their children (namely mental health and/or alcohol or other drug issues); the death of a parent during childhood; and their families’ experiences of homelessness. For most young people, these childhood difficulties were numerous and inter-related: with eight of the 15 reporting three or more difficulties.

I’ve been on and off homeless since I was about 14, 15. My Mum has bipolar, so I would go through, most of the time I was homeless. I would be like two weeks out of two to three months, where I was actually home for a bit, and then I’d get kicked out again, so I’d either be on the street mostly or I would be with friends, like couch-up with friends.

(YM11_22)

4.1.1 | Aspirations

Young people were then asked to reflect on their priorities before they had fallen pregnant or become younger parents. They were given a list of aspirations generated from the existing literature and added to after preceding interviews. Priorities include ‘being safe and feeling safe’, ‘being healthy’, ‘feeling happy with life’ and ‘doing well in education’.

In Figures 2 and 3, we provide a snapshot of young people’s top and bottom priorities.

As demonstrated in Figure 3, 13 young people saw ‘becoming a parent’ as a low priority. In fact, eight ranked all the other aspirations as being more important to them before becoming a parent. Similarly, young people often ranked ‘having a positive relationship with their birth family’ as a lower priority.

Interestingly, none of the participants identified having a child as a priority with younger parents more likely to identify ‘having a good relationship with their birth family’.

4.1.2 | Being Safe and Feeling Safe

Safety was the top priority for young parents. This was especially significant for young people who had experienced a lack of safety during their childhoods, recalling instances of physical and sexual violence that profoundly impacted their lives. Many

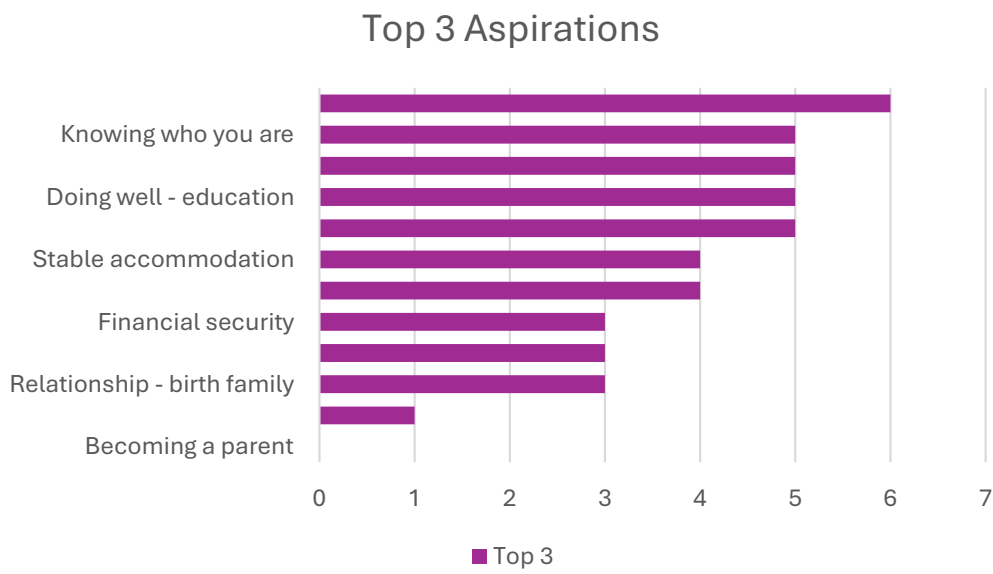


FIGURE 2 | Priority aspirations.

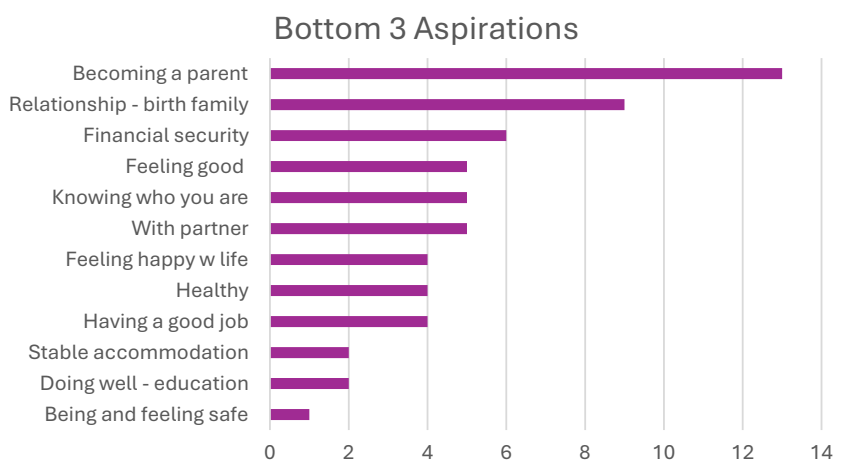


FIGURE 3 | Young people's low priorities prior to becoming a parent.

expressed a strong desire not only to ensure their own safety in adulthood but also to be well-equipped to provide their future children with physical and emotional security. For example, one participant noted,

If you're not safe or if you're not mentally or emotionally safe or you don't live in a safe environment... your child is going to grow up in that type of environment and he doesn't know what's wrong or what's bad.

(YF3_22)

For many of those who had transitioned from care or youth homelessness services, safety was something they continued to seek. For those living independently, a sense of safety and security related not only to stable accommodation but also to confidence in being protected from harm, maintaining safe relationships, and living in communities free of violence.

4.1.3 | Knowing Who You Are

Younger parents ranked 'knowing who you are' as one of their key priorities. Some reflected that during periods of care or homelessness, they often 'drifted' or were in 'survival mode' and had little opportunity to get to know themselves outside the challenges they faced. One young person explained,

Knowing who you are [is important now], because when I was younger, I did feel lost. There were a lot of times where I tried to find myself with trying different things and moving out of home, seeing if that would help myself.

(YM5_22)

This was particularly relevant for young people who wanted to cast off limiting notions of themselves as either "a kid in care" or a "homeless youth." They recognised that while surviving

these systems was an achievement, they needed to find identities beyond these experiences to guide their sense of self and aspirations.

4.1.4 | Being Healthy

Young people prioritised their health—both physical and mental—as a cornerstone of their aspirations. Many noted how their early childhood experiences and time in care or homelessness services took a toll on their wellbeing. In transitioning to adulthood, they began prioritising their wellness, recognising that without it, achieving other goals would be difficult. One participant explained,

Because if I'm not emotionally healthy, how can I expect my daughter to be emotionally healthy?

(YM1_23)

Participants made clear links between being happy and healthy, seeing these as interconnected priorities not only for themselves but also for their children. They emphasised that happiness and emotional health were essential for fostering a positive environment and instilling healthy values in their children.

4.1.5 | Stable Accommodation

Stable accommodation was frequently highlighted as a basic need to be secured before young people could achieve other goals. For those who had experienced periods of homelessness, having a stable place to live was invaluable. As one participant described,

I was homeless for all my teens. I lived on the streets, with friends, in services. I never had nowhere, and I missed out on so much because of it. We have to fix housing if young people are going to have a chance [to achieve their goals].

(YM4_20)

Despite these aspirations, many young people described post-care life as marked by instability. Some younger fathers expressed frustration that during their partners' pregnancies, they were not allowed to stay with their pregnant girlfriends and, in some cases, experienced homelessness or unsatisfactory living conditions. Other young people reported that their independent living arrangements ended prematurely, leaving them without secure housing and, at times, leading to a loss of employment, education opportunities, or exacerbated mental health issues.

4.1.6 | Education and Employment

The aspirations towards education and employment among young people who have experienced OOHHC or adverse

childhoods reveal a complex interplay of challenges and resilience. Many participants shared their aspirations to achieve educational success and secure stable, fulfilling jobs. These aspirations often reflected a desire for financial independence and a sense of personal accomplishment.

Young people commonly connected their career ambitions to their life experiences, with some inspired to pursue professions that could allow them to support others as highlighted by one participant:

Because when I was 13, I learned what youth work was, and I decided that it was something that I wanted to do, to help and give back.

(YM9_22)

Despite these aspirations, participants often faced significant barriers. Early schooling experiences were frequently disrupted by instability, with some moving between schools or disengaging from education entirely.

Some of the young people had recommenced their education after they, or their partner, had become pregnant. The younger fathers, for example, felt that it was important for them to have stable income—particularly when they and their partners had experienced homelessness—and had made active efforts to secure a job.

Younger mothers, however, reported that it was often difficult for them to achieve their aspirations towards education or employment, particularly when their children were younger. However, those who accessed alternative education programmes or re-engaged in school later in life often found renewed motivation. One participant reflected,

Yes, I was able to attend school and all of that. I went to a really, really good school. They supported me in many ways, which I appreciated. I used to see a school counsellor at that school. She was amazing. She helped me out a lot through my hard times.

(YM2_20)

4.1.7 | Parenting

Most young people in this study expressed a strong preference to delay parenthood, often aspiring to become parents only in their late twenties or thirties. This decision was deeply influenced by their personal challenges and aspirations for stability and readiness.

[My partner] and I have been in an 'on and off' relationship probably... but we never really anticipated it happening so early in life... We definitely weren't ready. There was stuff we wanted sorted first.

(YF1_23)

For many, their adverse childhood experiences shaped this perspective, with participants emphasising the importance of providing a better environment for their future children. As one young person explained, “I wanted to make sure I had my life sorted and that I was ready to give a child the best start I could” (YM5_24).

Other young people stressed that they wanted to deal with some of the impacts of their childhoods before becoming parents. They felt that it was important for them to be ready to parent and actively or passively took steps to avoid becoming a parent: “Being a parent wasn’t something I wanted when I was young—I needed to feel like I was in control of my life first” (YM2_20).

Others stressed a desire to achieve financial stability, addressing mental health challenges, and securing stable housing. For some, parenthood was seen as an aspiration for the future rather than an immediate priority. A participant reflected, “I definitely wanted to set myself up for success to be a parent. I didn’t want to struggle the way my parents did” (YM4_20).

Many young people in the study actively or passively sought to avoid becoming pregnant, though their methods varied and often reflected gaps in education and access to resources. Six participants explicitly described using contraceptives during their teenage years to prevent pregnancy, highlighting their awareness of the challenges associated with teen parenthood.

One young woman attributed her decision to avoid pregnancy to the negative portrayals of teen parenting in media, stating, “We have all the movies that tell us about teen pregnancies, and how scary it is, and how much bullying you can get from it. And I think that actually really did put me off kids” (YM3_23).

Contraceptive failures and misconceptions about their efficacy were common among participants. For instance, one participant described how her contraceptive implant embedded into her muscle and had to be removed, leading to an unintended pregnancy during the waiting period before a replacement was inserted. Her partner recalled:

She had to get [a new contraceptive insert but this was delayed due to COVID], and in that process... we ended up falling pregnant. So, it was out for about maybe three weeks, and in that time we fell pregnant.

(YF1_23)

4.2 | Question 3: Impact of Childhood Experiences on Aspirations

We were interested in understanding how young people’s aspirations were influenced by things that had gone on in their lives. Young people were asked to think about the ways that they believed their early childhood experiences affected their aspirations, particularly in relation to becoming a parent. For some, “their experiences motivated them to work hard, to take steps to achieve their goals and to provide their children

with better childhoods than me” (YF1_23). However, others talked about how the ongoing trauma, the impacts on their sense of self and their ability to achieve and their personal circumstances curbed their aspirations and their ability to achieve them.

4.2.1 | Broader Aspirations

Young people’s experiences of child maltreatment often shaped their aspirations, making it difficult for them to envision or pursue long-term goals. Many reflected that their childhoods lacked safety and stability, which left them focused on meeting basic needs rather than dreaming about the future.

Probably because they were the biggest things that I didn’t have when I was younger and it was a constant feeling of unsafe, not knowing how long we’re going to be in a house before we get kicked out or being moved again and never having any money at all.

(YM10_25)

However, some participants expressed a strong determination to break free from cycles of adversity and pursue education or stable employment, which they viewed as essential for achieving financial independence and redefining their identities.

I wanted to be able to stand on my own two feet and prove I could do better than my parents.

(YM3_25)

4.3 | Question 4: How Might the System Help Them Achieve Their Dreams

4.3.1 | Support in Building Aspirations

When asked what support they would have valued to build their aspirations, young people often mentioned the importance of trusted workers who could inspire hope and provide practical assistance in achieving their goals. Some spoke about the value of tangible tools, such as vision boards or step-by-step plans to help realise their dreams.

Probably just having someone there that could really support me, writing these down and then going, ‘Okay, how can we achieve it? How can we make it into reality?’ And basically, maybe helping me along the way, like not writing them down and just throwing them out sort of thing, or just pushing them to the side, making sure that I actually do it.

(YM9_22)

For others, encouragement from workers was seen as vital:

Supporting my dreams and my hopes and just being there and saying, ‘One day you’re going to get there,’

sort of thing. ‘Yeah, it’s going to take time, but I believe in you.’ That sort of thing and maybe just helping me along the way to achieve those goals as well.

(YM5_24)

4.3.2 | Support in Preventing Unintended Parenthood

Although young people did not regret having children, many believed that unintended pregnancies could have been prevented with better access to tailored sexual health education. They stressed the importance of trauma-informed approaches that addressed their unique needs and experiences.

They didn’t talk to us like we were people who had gone through things—they just assumed we were the same as everyone else.

(YM4_20)

Participants suggested peer-led education as a way to make the realities of young parenting relatable and credible.

If someone my age who’s been through it told me how hard it really is, I would’ve listened more.

(YM2_23)

4.3.3 | Support in Achieving Goals While Parenting

Parenting often reshaped young people’s personal goals, but they believed targeted support could help them continue working towards their aspirations. Key supports included stable housing, financial assistance, and flexible education or employment opportunities. One young woman remarked, “Knowing my baby was cared for while I studied made all the difference.” (YM2_20).

Mentorship and peer networks also played a role in fostering motivation and confidence. As one participant noted: “Seeing someone like me finish school and get a job gave me hope that I could do it too.” (YM6_16).

Lastly, mental health and emotional support were considered essential for processing past trauma and building resilience.

4.3.4 | Involvement in Informing Support Approaches

Young parents expressed a strong desire to shape support systems for others in similar circumstances. They highlighted the importance of challenging stereotypes and advocating for holistic, trauma-informed services.

We want people to understand that we’re doing our best, often with fewer resources and more judgment.

(YM4_20)

Participants advocated for peer-led initiatives where young parents could provide input into service design and delivery

because “We know what works because we’ve been through it.” (YM2_23). By sharing their journeys and successes, young parents aimed to inspire others and foster hope. “If we show others that it’s possible to dream big and still be a good parent, it can make a huge difference.” (YM11_24).

5 | Discussion

This study was conducted alongside a similar project that engaged young people who were exiting care or a homelessness service who were not yet parents (McDougall et al. 2023). Both studies note that young people prioritise personal goals, such as education, stable housing, and financial security, over early parenthood.

A key difference, however, lies in the nuanced framing of their views on early parenting. While young people in both samples highlighted the influence of childhood adversity on their aspirations, younger parents focused more on the socio-structural challenges, such as homelessness and care system deficiencies, that shaped young people’s decisions and experiences. In contrast, young people not yet parents placed a stronger emphasis on individual and relational factors, such as the desire to break intergenerational cycles of trauma and to equip themselves to provide their children better lives than they had themselves (McDougall et al. 2023).

Young people in both studies believed that the system needed to better understand how their time in care and homelessness services affected their aspirations and felt that, to help them achieve better outcomes, investment needed to be made to help them build goals and to realise their dreams.

5.1 | Understanding and Building Young People’s Aspirations and Providing Opportunities to Help Them Succeed

Similar to findings in our previous study (McDougall et al. 2023), young people identified a broad range of aspirations for their future. Some expressed a lack of optimism, feeling that their childhood experiences and trauma had limited their aspirations related to education, employment, stability and self-identity. This aligns with existing trauma and careleaver literature that recognises that young people who have experienced maltreatment often hold negative schemas related to their futures and can find it difficult to develop aspirations for their future selves (Dye 2018; Gill et al. 2023; Lanius et al. 2020). Studies in Australia and elsewhere have pointed to the ways that the care system reinforces these negative schemas and can play a part in perpetuating pessimistic views for the future (Purtell and Morris 2025; Moore et al. 2025).

Many younger parents did not believe their limited aspirations directly influenced their path to parenthood, as pregnancies were often accidental. However, they felt opportunities could have helped build aspirations and achieve their dreams. They sought support to understand themselves, feel confident, and find happiness in their identity and place in the world. Contrary to previous research suggesting younger parents can experience a range of negative outcomes when they had limited goals for

the future (Dunne 2025; Noble-Carr and Woodman 2018), participants in this study reported having aspirations they had put on hold, hoping to pursue them when their children were older.

Studies show that having a sense of self and future vision, along with opportunities to achieve goals, is protective even amid adversity (Kim et al. 2019). This sense of future aspiration can reduce risk-taking behaviours, including unsafe sex and early pregnancy (Meek 2011; Savage et al. 2019). Although aspirations alone may not prevent early pregnancy, fostering goal development and achievement can reduce the likelihood of young people becoming parents before they are ready (Purtell et al. 2020).

Previous research suggests that support services are well-positioned to aid in building these goals. Noble-Carr et al. (2014) and others (Purtell et al. 2020; Gill et al. 2023; Moore et al. 2025) argue that such services should focus on facilitating caring connections, community ties, a sense of belonging, mastery, and hope, which can enhance self-awareness, self-esteem, and resilience. However, OOHC and transitions research highlights a lack of supports available to young people to develop or achieve such dreams.

Conversely, other young people had clear aspirations for their futures, aiming for educational success, good jobs, and stability. These aspirations were often shaped by their early experiences, including a desire to provide their children (or their future children) with better childhoods than they had. International research underscores the importance of working with young people, especially as they exit systems like child protection and out-of-home care, to build aspirations and create schemas of hoped-for and feared selves (Noble-Carr and Woodman 2018; Wainwright et al. 2018; Oyserman et al. 2004; OECD 2022). This support is required alongside assistance to deal with practical challenges (such as acquiring stable accommodation) and developing skills to live independently (Brady et al. 2025).

Despite their aspirations, many young people faced barriers like poor mental health, homelessness, and relationship difficulties that hindered their success. Structural issues, such as the lack of public and community housing and insufficient support for employment, were significant obstacles (Brady et al. 2025; Gill 2024; Mendes et al. 2025). This gap between aspirations and experiences highlights the need for support in navigating barriers and developing problem-solving skills, as emphasised in research on young people and younger parents (Brady et al. 2025; Butler et al. 2010; OECD 2022).

For young people who have experienced adversity it is essential to invest in supports that build their skills, confidence, and sense of readiness (OECD 2022). Young people rarely mentioned programmes available within or outside of their out-of-home care (OOHC) or homelessness settings, particularly as they transitioned towards adulthood.

5.2 | Engaging Young People in Developing Responses and Strategies

Participants emphasised the importance of enabling young people to share their stories and influence support systems for those

with challenging childhoods. They valued being heard and contributing to change.

Suggestions included involving young people in co-facilitating sexual and reproductive health programmes and providing insights into parenting. They believed they could offer valuable perspectives to policymakers and practitioners, especially regarding support needs when preparing for parenthood. Previous research has demonstrated the value of doing so (Voss 2021; McPherson et al. 2021; Mullins et al. 2021). Such involvement leads to more responsive programmes and improved outcomes, with participants reporting greater satisfaction when acting as informants, peer supporters and co-facilitators (Nixon et al. 2019; Cataldo et al. 2021; Levac 2013). Previous research highlights the value young parents place on participation, self-efficacy and collective action (Levac 2013).

6 | Conclusions

This study disrupts dominant narratives that cast young parents—particularly those with experiences of homelessness or out-of-home care—as lacking ambition or direction. On the contrary, the young people we spoke with voiced powerful aspirations for their futures, demonstrating resilience, self-awareness, and a deep desire for stability and growth. Parenting was not a retreat from ambition but, for many, a catalyst for change.

Their stories point to the urgent need for trauma-informed, strengths-based support that recognises and builds on young people's goals—not just their vulnerabilities. Policy and service responses must move beyond deficit thinking and instead be co-designed with young people—parents and non-parents alike—to ensure that they are responsive, inclusive and future-focused. Young people are not the problem; with the right support, they are the solution.

6.1 | Implications for Policy and Practice

The findings from this study highlight the need for policies and practices that not only respond to the complex challenges faced by young parents transitioning from out-of-home care (OOHC) and homelessness systems, but also actively nurture their aspirations and create meaningful opportunities to realise them. This work should commence early as aspirations can take time to develop. Too often, support systems focus narrowly on risk and remediation, overlooking young people's ambitions, capacities and desire for a better future. Problematically, they also can reinforce negative schemas that restrict young people's hopes for their future (Moore et al. 2025; Noble-Carr and Woodman 2018; Wainwright et al. 2018).

To address this, policies must be underpinned by trauma-informed, strengths-based approaches that recognise young people as agents in their own lives. This includes ensuring access to stable housing, responsive mental health care, and flexible education and employment pathways—foundations that enable young people to pursue their goals with confidence (Gill et al. 2020; Martin et al. 2021; Purtell et al. 2022). Importantly, support should extend beyond crisis management to include

long-term, relational engagement that builds hope and vision for the future (Purtell et al. 2022; McDougall et al. 2023).

Programmes such as sexual health and relationship education might also be reimaged to empower young people to make decisions about parenting while affirming their agency, reflect their lived experiences, and equip them to make decisions that align with their aspirations. When young parents are supported not just to survive but to thrive, they can—and do—build strong, positive futures for themselves and their children (Michell and Scalzi 2016).

Younger parents emphasised the importance of being active participants in shaping the policies and services that affect them. Co-designing programmes, peer-led initiatives, and mentorship can enhance their agency and ensure interventions align with their needs and aspirations. Participants valued these approaches, noting their potential to create more effective support systems (Levac 2013) and reduce stigma (Conn et al. 2018; Roberts 2021).

Reducing structural barriers, such as the lack of access to affordable housing and pathways to education and employment, is critical (Purtell et al. 2020; Brady et al. 2025). Younger parents transitioning from OOH or homelessness need targeted support to navigate these challenges, build confidence, and gain skills for independence. Investing in these areas improves individual outcomes, breaks intergenerational cycles of disadvantage, and fosters a more equitable society (Owens 2022).

6.2 | Limitations of the Study

This study provides valuable insights into the aspirations and experiences of young people with a history of out-of-home care (OOHC) and adverse childhoods, despite several limitations.

Firstly, conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic, the study faced challenges in participant recruitment and engagement, as many eligible young people were not in contact with necessary services due to movement restrictions and increased pressures on providers. This may limit the diversity of experiences represented.

Also, due to limitations arising from COVID we were only able to engage young people in co-reflexive activities at the end of the project. We join with others in promoting the strengths of engaging young people with care and homelessness experience as co-researchers (Moore et al. 2016) but were not able to implement this as anticipated.

Secondly, the sample was small, with only 15 young parents, and only two identified as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander. In South Australia, approximately 37%–40% of children in care are Aboriginal, despite Aboriginal children making up about 5%–6% of the child population in the state (AIHW 2021). This underrepresentation of Aboriginal youth in the study necessitates further targeted studies to be completed. Additionally, with only four male participants, young fathers were underrepresented, constraining the range of perspectives included.

Thirdly, most participants reported unplanned pregnancies, often due to contraceptive failures, limiting the diversity of pathways to parenthood and underrepresenting those who intentionally pursued it.

Despite these limitations, the study offers unique insights into the experiences of young parents in South Australia. We believe, also, that the findings might provide insights that could be further explored with other groups of young people in Australia and abroad and which could be used to underpin efforts to improve outcomes and build aspirations elsewhere.

Author Contributions

Tim Moore: conceptualization, methodology, investigation, formal analysis, supervision, project administration, writing – original draft, writing – review and editing. **Stewart McDougall:** conceptualization, methodology, funding acquisition, writing – review and editing.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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