What it takes to shift culture in care and education

Reflections on the delivery and impact of two growth mindset programmes in schools and residential care

At a glance

The challenge

Care Experienced Young People (CEYP) face barriers that can limit their ability to thrive, leading to poorer outcomes in education, health, housing and employment. The adults who work with them are deeply committed to making a difference, but operate within systems that are stretched, reactive and not always built to support the relationships and emotional safety that young people, and the adult workers themselves, need. As a result, there are persistent gaps in how young people's needs are understood and nurtured.

The programmes

Building on Winning Scotland's previous work delivering growth mindset professional development in education and in social care, two targeted learning programmes were developed to support staff working with care experienced young people in Dundee and South Lanarkshire:

- **Mindset for Care Experienced Young People in Education (MiCEYP)**, which helped secondary school staff use growth mindset strategies to understand and support care experienced pupils to improve educational, social and emotional outcomes.
- **Mindset in Social Care 2 (MiSCare2)**, which worked with residential care staff to bring growth mindset into their everyday work with young people and within their teams to encourage more positive outcomes.

11
residential houses

5
schools

100+
education and care professionals

The response

Growth mindset approaches offer a practical way to strengthen relationships, build confidence and change culture. By focusing on learning, effective effort and potential, they help create environments where both young people and the adults around them believe in their ability to grow and succeed. In care and education settings, this helps shift thinking from what's missing to what's possible. It also supports the implementation of The Promise – a national commitment to ensure all children and young people in Scotland grow up loved, safe and respected so that they realise their full potential, through delivery of Independent Care Review recommendations by 2030.

The learning

Although the learning programmes took place in different settings, there were common patterns in what supports and hinders change. This report highlights what worked, where the challenges lie and what needs to be in place to build a culture of growth mindset in education and care.

78% ***of MiSCare2 survey respondents said the programme helped them use mindset skills with young people***

What is growth mindset?

These learning programmes are based on the research of Professor Carol Dweck, which shows that our mindset — the beliefs we hold about ourselves and our abilities — influences how we respond to learning, challenges and change.

With a growth mindset, we believe that skills and abilities can be developed through effective effort, useful strategies and support from others. A fixed mindset assumes that talents and intelligence are something you're born with and cannot improve.

In work with care experienced young people, growth mindset is not just an individual concept. It is a relational and cultural approach. Research shows that when adults believe in a young person's potential and model learning from mistakes, they help create environments where growth and self-belief can take root.

"It has been good having my Champion to talk to. We chat and play football. It's been lots of fun!"

- Care experienced young person at participating school

Programme summaries

Mindset for Care Experienced Young People

90 young people

care experienced young people and their peers

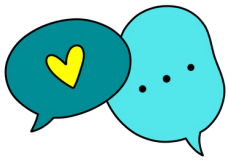
54 school staff

including pupil support, learning support, class teachers, Care Experienced Champions, guidance teachers and SMT

The Mindset for Care Experienced Young People (MiCEYP) programme was designed to help school staff feel more confident and capable in supporting care experienced young people. Through the professional development programme, staff learned about growth mindset through a trauma-informed lens and took steps to create a growth mindset culture within their school. The programme was funded under the 'Supportive School Structure' theme of the Keep The Promise Fund, which focuses on building an environment that addresses students' academic, emotional and social needs.

The programme followed a phased structure that moved from listening and learning to action and collaboration:

A Place in Childhood (APiC) led workshops with over 90 young people from five schools in South Lanarkshire and Dundee, including CEYP and their peers to hear about their experiences of school and the local community. Care experienced young people were also given dedicated time to share what mattered most to them and about their experiences of support in school - what's working and what could be better.



ProjectChange ran focus groups with 14 key staff, including SMT within those same schools to understand current strengths, challenges and opportunities for improvement.

Feedback from young people and staff informed the design of the professional development programme, which included online learning modules for all participants, followed by a more in-depth in-person session within each school. Initially, the in-person element was only intended for a smaller group of 'trusted adults' identified by the CEYP during their session with APiC but was ultimately made available to all staff following suggestions by the CEYP and staff, to ensure a broader understanding of care experience and wider support within their school.

Participants who took part in both the online and in-person learning then went on to apply their learning through a 'mini-project', to test small changes and begin to create a growth mindset culture within their school.

The MiCEYP programme began in January 2023 and was planned to run for two years. Due to significant delays in the beginning, the time for delivering the professional learning was much shorter than originally intended and had knock on effects on other aspects of the programme. An extension was granted until June 2025 to support staff to complete the programme. 54 school staff (including senior management, support staff and class teachers) took part. Early evidence points to positive changes in staff mindset, increased awareness and understanding of care experience as an identity, and examples of more responsive support for young people.

"The programme provided an opportunity to stand in care experienced young people's shoes. I appreciated the 'realness' of those shared experiences."

- Member of school staff, MiCEYP programme

"I'm reassured that we're on the right track. It was really important to me that we didn't just jump in. I wanted to ensure that the pupil voice led us in where we're going and today I've heard that being echoed right across – the importance of pupil voice, considering next steps and letting it grow with them because their needs are so unique."

- Lorna Jensen, Depute Head, Cathkin High School, speaking at the joint Mindset in Care Celebration Event

Mindset in Social Care 2

80+

focus group participants for the wider strategic work

50

residential care staff

MiSCare2 built on earlier pilot work with key improvements based on feedback – including all in-person sessions and stronger support from management from the outset – to help residential care staff develop a team-based approach to growth mindset. Like MiCEYP, the programme placed lived experience at the heart of its design, and emphasised peer support and reflective relationships within staff teams. By supporting the wellbeing of staff and strengthening the support they offer to the young people in their care, it aligned with the 'Supported Workforce' theme of the Keep The Promise Fund.

The 18-month programme began in October 2023. Nine Champions Board members from five local authority areas validated changes made to the programme following the pilot, and provided further feedback after completing the training themselves.

Focus groups also took place as part of wider strategic work, involving over 80 people from across the care system, including leaders, senior managers, frontline practitioners, those with lived experience of care, foster and kinship carers, and organisations shaping the system. These conversations highlighted how policy and structures shape everyday practice, as well as revealing the realities of frontline practice to help identify what kind of support was most needed.

A total of 50 staff from residential houses across Dundee and South Lanarkshire took part in the MiSCare2 programme which involved:

- **Three full-day sessions** to learn about growth mindset and apply it to the realities of residential care.
- A growth mindset **mini-project** undertaken within house teams to apply learning and improve a specific area in their own setting.
- **A short follow-up session** to reflect on learning and discuss successes and challenges in applying what they have learned, so far.

The work showed how important relationships are in residential care and what needs to change to make them a central part of the way the care sector operates.

81 %

81% of participants planned to follow up the programme by actively putting their new mindset skills into practice with their team at work.

-14.5 %

There was a statistically significant reduction in staff perceived stress scores, by 14.5%

A joint celebration event took place in May 2025, where participants from the MiCEYP and MiSCare2 programmes came together to share their experiences, celebrate successes, and look at ways to collaborate going forward.

"'It takes a village to raise a young person. When a young person is care experienced and has faced trauma, the support of that village is vital — for both the young person and those supporting them."

- Dr Lerleen Willis, Aya Coaching and Consultancy, speaking at the joint celebration event

Click here to watch the celebration event video

Key learnings – successes

What worked?

Both mindset learning programmes showed that when staff are supported to reflect, share and act together, positive change is not just possible but often already underway. Despite the well-known pressures in education and care, staff responded with commitment, curiosity and an evident desire to do better for the young people they support.

Across both sectors, the following themes stood out as key strengths:

High staff engagement despite capacity challenges

Although sign up and onboarding was challenging in schools, due to staff shortages and competing pressures, staff in both sectors made time for the professional development and experiential learning. This level of commitment suggests a high level of enthusiasm to learn about growth mindset and a genuine appetite to better understand and support themselves, their colleagues and of course, care experienced young people.

Prioritising lived experience and real stories

Hearing directly from care experienced young people had a more powerful impact on participants than theory alone. Education staff described an 'aha moment' when they realised there was a gap between their perception of the support available and what young people actually experience.

Creating time and space for reflection and collaboration

Both programmes provided structured opportunities for staff to pause and reflect, which they rarely have time for. They welcomed the chance to learn from colleagues in different parts of the system, as well as from young people. Staff also recognised that the protected time and physical spaces available for these conversations mattered: they sent a message about how much young people's and staff's voices were valued.

"It was good to go over the material again, and realise that I have been implementing a lot of what I have learnt without realising it since the programme began."

- Member of residential staff, MiSCare2 programme

Blended learning model offered flexibility, though in-person sessions preferred

While MiCEYP participants welcomed the combination of online and face-to-face formats, there was a greater preference for in-person sessions, which aligns with the relational approach. For some, competing priorities and capacity issues made the online modules harder to complete. Mini work-based projects allowed staff on both programmes to try out new approaches through meaningful tests of change. While schedules made participation challenging for some, staff were keen for others to have the opportunity to experience the learning too. At the programme level, being able to respond and adapt to feedback was key to successful delivery.

"I hope the funding for this learning programme continues. I would like my colleagues to have the chance to look at their own mindset and make the changes needed to ensure we are all working to best of our ability with our children and young people in our care."

- Member of residential staff, MiSCare2 programme

Increased confidence, self-efficacy and shared language among staff

Framing the work around potential, not problems, helped staff feel affirmed in their values. Staff described feeling more confident in their roles, more aligned with colleagues and better able to approach challenges with curiosity instead of judgement. Several noted that they had begun using growth mindset language across teams, creating greater consistency for young people. This strengths-based, relational approach resonated especially in residential care, where relationships are essential but often under-supported.

"I think that there is something important in social care around expectations – there's lots of research showing that kids are really influenced by our expectations of them, so having a growth mindset about talent and ability should encourage us to raise those expectations."

- MiSCare pilot participant

"I find myself taking the time to listen to the young people. Instead of focussing on the bad I ask them to explain how they feel to make them behave this way."

- Member of residential staff, MiSCare2 programme

Examples of good practice

Examples of good practice

The mini-projects gave staff a way to turn learning into action in a way that felt achievable and relevant, often leading to small but meaningful shifts in culture and practice:

- In one school, staff ambassadors set up a focus group with care experienced young people to hear about their needs and preferences first-hand, rather than make assumptions.
- Several residential care teams used mindset tools to help young people (and themselves) to reframe setbacks, encourage effective effort and promote a more strengths-based internal culture.
- In one house, the team adapted their debriefing process after incidents to include mindset prompts that helped de-escalate situations and build trust.

"I have become much more aware of my behaviour, I now think before I react to others. I also have noticed behaviours in colleagues which I've never noticed before."

- Member of residential staff, MiSCare2 programme

Mini case study

Mindset in practice:

From assumption to understanding

In Cathkin High School, change began with listening. Fifteen pupils, including those with care experience, took part in workshops with APiC to share what school felt like for them. Following this, 17 staff registered to take part in the MiCEYP's online learning element, and six went on to attend the in-person session delivered by Winning Scotland and Out of the Blue with Lee. These six volunteers became 'ambassadors' for care-experienced young people in the school.

The programme had a significant emotional and practical impact. Staff began to question whether the support in place was reaching the pupils who needed it most. Instead of moving straight into action, they decided to ask. A focus group – held in a space the young people identified as safe – revealed unseen barriers and challenged the staff's assumptions. Plans are now being shaped around what pupils actually said they want and need, not what the adults expected.

"[The programme] definitely changed the way we moved forward, because I would have gone in gung-ho...I think the programme made us all sit back and think wow, actually this is about what the pupils want and need because it's their life, their lived experiences. I think had we not done the professional learning we would have gone ahead as a group of staff and decided."

- Member of school staff, MiCEYP programme

Mini case study

Mindset in practice:

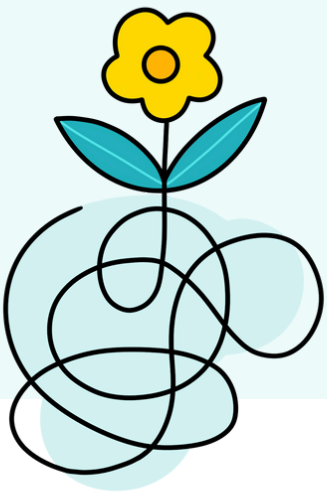
Reflecting, not reacting

In The Junction, Residential House, Dundee, staff who took part in the learning programme began approaching challenges differently. They focused on setting meaningful goals, staying consistent and viewing setbacks as opportunities to learn rather than as signs of failure. Staff described improvements in resilience, emotional regulation, communication and confidence. Reflective conversations became more common, with teams asking, “What can we learn from this?” instead of, “Why did this go wrong?”

“Since the programme, we’ve started having more reflective conversations as a team… encouraging each other to try new approaches without fear of being judged. We’re creating space for open discussion about setbacks, where the focus is on growth rather than blame.”

- Member of residential staff, MiSCare2 programme

This has already started to shape team culture. Those who took part in the learning programme have passed their learning on, encouraging colleagues to:



See challenges as chances to grow

Reflect, even when things don’t go to plan

Believe in each other’s ability to improve

Stay motivated, even when the work is tough

What we learned

While both learning programmes led to positive outcomes, they also highlighted shared barriers to supporting care experienced young people, pointing to several structural, cultural and personal changes needed to make change possible.

Staff capacity is a constant constraint

One of the most significant challenges in both education and social care was simply finding time to participate fully in the learning programme. Staff juggled extensive workloads, shift demands, and competing priorities, often without any protected space and time to reflect or collaborate. In residential care, frequent staff absences, shift clashes and lack of cover made it difficult for teams to plan and deliver their mini-projects. In schools, capacity issues and staff cover were also big issues, and delays due to staff changes led to a shortened timeline and made it difficult to keep the momentum going.

The systemic challenge

Despite enthusiasm and commitment, staff in both sectors found that their ability to implement meaningful change was limited by the systems they work within.

> **"We all work different shifts 99% of the time. Finding time together has been difficult."**
>
> - Member of residential staff, MiSCare2 programme

Collaboration is often limited by hierarchy and fragmentation

Many frontline workers feel disconnected from the decisions that shape their work. Senior leaders mostly engage with middle managers, meaning key insights from those on the ground are lost. More broadly, there is a sense that local authorities are sometimes in competition with each other to demonstrate best practice, as are higher education institutions, which can deter staff from different authorities and organisations from working together and sharing learning.

> **"We have less impact if we're all working in silo than we do when we're all working together with the same goal of supporting young people to be the best they can be."**
>
> - Scott Hay, MiSCare2 Delivery Partner, speaking at the joint celebration event

Organisational structures tend to be driven by function, not relationships

While relationships matter, they're not prioritised. Staff at all levels in both sectors recognised the need to build trust and connection with colleagues, young people and other services, but say the pressure to be "productive" leaves little space for this. Both social care and education are particularly focused on efficiency, targets and outputs. Relationship-building can often be treated as an 'add-on' or something to be done when time allows, rather than a core part of the job, despite evidence that strong relationships make the overall work more effective.

Goodwill, not systems, held much of the work together

The success of both programmes often depended on individual energy and commitment — people choosing to engage, follow up or lead when it wasn't formally required. While this speaks to the strength of the workforce, it also highlights a core challenge: the system relies heavily on personal motivation, rather than building supportive structures that make reflective, relational work part of the daily practice.

> "Many professionals appreciate having spaces to reflect, but they struggle to engage fully because workloads are not adjusted to accommodate them.... If these spaces are to be effective, they must be built into work structures in a meaningful way - not just as an additional requirement."

- Rachael Borthwick, ProjectChange, Programme partner

The mindset challenge

One of the key goals for these experiential learning programmes was to help staff develop a growth mindset themselves, so they can model it for the young people they work with. While many participants said they were already quite familiar with the concept, putting it into practice exposed some long-held assumptions about ability, behaviour, care experience and the possibility of change within existing systems.

The professional learning helped reframe how staff see care experience

In schools especially, staff described how the learning programme helped them reframe their understanding of what it means to be 'care experienced'. Instead of focusing on challenges or behaviours, they began to reflect on how their responses, expectations and language could either reinforce limiting beliefs or create space for growth.

> **"Before, I thought I understood care experience, but I didn't really. Now I think more carefully about what a young person might be carrying and how my reaction can either help or harm."**
>
> - Member of school staff, MiCEYP programme

Growth mindset requires reflection, openness and psychological safety

Some participants found it uncomfortable to question their own responses or habits, at least initially. Newer or more junior staff felt hesitant about bringing new ideas to colleagues who were not involved in the programme, in case they were met with resistance. Equally, more senior staff sometimes held back from sharing personal experiences in focus groups, looking to give the 'right' answer and feel in control of the situation.

> **"I was apprehensive to speak to staff about how we could improve our practice... some people have 30+ years' experience over me. They might not take what I say on board."**
>
> - Member of residential staff, MiSCare2 programme

Real change needs cultural permission, not just personal effort

Participants in both learning programmes expressed a desire to do things differently, but many said they weren't always sure they had permission to try something new or get it wrong. Some staff in social care recognised that there's a level of comfort in the chaos: it can feel safer to work reactively and respond to problems as they arise than to stop and try a different approach. Several residential workers acknowledged that this 'firefighting' mindset, while understandable, had become the norm. If the system doesn't change and prioritise more time and space for relationship building, it's far less likely that individuals will feel empowered to do so.

The delivery challenge

Delivering these experiential growth mindset learning programmes wasn't always straightforward. Both sectors are under huge pressure, and while there was real enthusiasm for the work, partners faced several practical challenges in getting things up and running.

Staffing changes disrupted momentum

Much of the strongest practice was championed by individuals. But when those individuals changed roles or left, the work often stalled. Staff sickness and turnover among delivery teams and local authority leads meant new people had to step in mid-way and rebuild relationships. This led to delays, inconsistent messaging and a sense that implementation was no longer a priority, as well as hindering evaluation. This highlights the importance of consistency, continuity and top-down support.

Listening and responding strengthened delivery

The MiCEYP programme started with the intention to build a learning circle around each young person. In practice, that model didn't quite fit. Partners planned to work only with the 'trusted adults' identified by the care experienced young people (CEYP), but feedback from both CEYP and staff suggested that more people needed to be involved. In response, the professional learning opportunity was offered to all school staff. Schools responded positively, and the change showed the value of staying flexible, giving pupil voice the attention it deserves, and working in partnership with staff.

Time and capacity pressures slowed things down

As noted, staff sometimes struggled to engage fully while juggling busy workloads. In some cases, this meant extending timelines or adjusting expectations to keep people involved. For example, ideally, whole teams from residential houses would have taken part together (something several staff mentioned), but logistically this was not possible. Splitting teams into two smaller groups meant staff felt supported without putting pressure on managers and houses. Capacity challenges also led one school to withdraw from the programme. They initially suggested that the learning be delivered directly to the young people, rather than to staff, due to these challenges. Unfortunately, this approach did not align with the programme's emphasis on adult-led, whole-system change, and both the school and delivery team agreed it was best for the school to withdraw.

"This reinforces that we need to make time for reflection and for the encouragement of those relationships – to keep chipping away at the wall that stands between what we know needs to happen and making it real."

- Ben Farrugia, Director, Social Work Scotland, speaking at the joint Mindset in Care Celebration Event

Communications need to be clear and coordinated

While both learning programmes began by listening closely to care experienced young people, not all school staff were aware of what the young people in their school had shared, or in some cases that their pupils had taken part in earlier workshops. Similarly, some participants found themselves out of the loop with what colleagues were doing. Some schools also found it difficult to connect the dots between different partners and their role in the programme. Again, this points to the importance of building strong, consistent relationships to ensure smoother delivery and continuity.

There's a strong appetite for wider access

Participants in both sectors wanted more people — especially senior leaders and carers — to be involved in mindset work. They recognised that for cultural change to take hold, the approach must be shared, consistent and reinforced across the whole team around the young person.

Manager engagement made a visible difference

In residential care, involving house managers early led to more tailored planning and stronger buy-in. When managers were visible and involved, staff felt more supported to apply what they were learning. Similarly, when senior staff in schools actively championed and modelled the work, overall staff engagement was stronger, signalling that the programme was both prioritised and valued.

"One thing that was surprising is how easy it can be to use a more fixed mindset, particularly with departmental pressures. However, the programme has allowed us to understand that growth mindset can be used in all aspects of our work and lives."

- MiSCare pilot participant

"It's excellent professional development. Absolutely brilliant. It is one of the best programmes we've done... Definitely more of it."

- Member of residential staff, MiSCare2 programme

Conclusion

Why growth mindset matters in care

Care experienced young people encounter challenges and inequalities, not only due to personal circumstances, but also because of the systems around them. The Promise sets out a vision to change this by 2030 and ensure all children and young people grow up feeling loved, safe and respected so that they realise their full potential. This means putting relationships at the centre of how we care, educate, lead and collaborate.

Growth mindset offers a practical, strengths-based framework to support this shift. Mindset is more than a cognitive tool. It involves the whole self – emotions, lived experience, and relationships. An experiential focus on mindset that prompts reflection on mistakes and vulnerability has the greatest impact. The mindset learning programmes show what's possible but also highlight that change won't last without structural support. In practice, this means:

- Protected time and space for professional development, implementation of learning, and any follow-up
- A commitment from leadership (at all levels) to treat relationship-building as core work and back it with resources
- Prioritising collaboration over competition to improve communication and share learning
- Empowering frontline staff to lead mindset work without unnecessary bureaucracy or pressure to 'get it right'
- Recognising that culture change is a process, and we should focus on the journey as much as the desired outcome

Most importantly, lived experience must continue to guide the design and delivery of this work, ensuring it stays grounded in what young people say they need most.

The appetite for change exists. The next step is ensuring the system is ready to support it.

> **"It has changed the way I would consider handling problems and mistakes and the way we view them within our lives. It gives you the confidence to say, well, no, let's think about it in a different way."**
>
> - Member of residential staff, MiSCare2 programme

"This [MiCEYP]programme is planting seeds that will continue growing long past the end of the programme… We can be excited about what's happening and how positively people have reacted to the programme."

- Dr Christina McMellon, independent researcher and evaluation partner, speaking at the joint celebration event

Get involved

"A huge thank you to everyone who took part – the school and care staff and young people who brought so much energy, honesty and heart to this work. You've helped us see what's possible when we focus on relationships and potential, rather than what's missing. Real change needs the right people and support behind it, so if this work speaks to you, please do get in touch. We've seen the impact this work can have, and we'd love for others to join us as we work to reach even more young people."

- Zahra Hedges, Chief Executive Officer, Winning Scotland

To find out more about Winning Scotland's growth mindset programmes and resources, please click the link below:

Current programmes - Winning Scotland

Read the evaluation and impact reports by clicking on the link below, which will take you to our impact page:

Evaluations and Impact

If you have any questions or would like to discuss opportunities to join us in building a culture of growth mindset, please contact **info@winningscotland.org**.
We'd love to hear from you.

Thank you! ❤

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