

Nurturing Group Work in a Children's Home

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Introduction

This paper describes a joint Education, Social Services and Health initiative which introduced the Family Links Nurturing Programme in a Sunderland Children's Home. This programme was already established in schools in Sunderland and responses to it were enthusiastic. It appeared to have a lot to offer to children and young people and adults who live and work in the residential care system. We aim to share the process of implementing the programme and also to convey some of the impact on those who took part in it. We hope to highlight the experience of delivering the programme and to document the impressions and reactions of some of the adults and young people involved. Looked after children have often had experiences which make it difficult for them to value themselves or others, while for staff, working in this setting can be challenging and stressful. The primary aim of running the Nurturing Programme was to help the young people and their carers feel nurtured and valued.

The setting and context

The Children's Home was selected for this project because it has a stable population of young people who are cared for by a well-motivated and well-managed staff group. The home itself was purpose-built in 1998, although the current staff team has been together since 1997. We look after seven young people, ranging in age from 13 to 16 at the time of the programme. All the children are placed in the home on a long-term basis.

The City of Sunderland Social Services management has overseen substantial improvements to its children's homes over the last decade or so. The numbers

of children living in homes has been reduced, allowing for much smaller homes which are mostly situated in established communities. We have, fortunately, moved away from large buildings with an institutional feel towards family type houses, which are decorated and furnished to a very high standard. The young people all have their own rooms and have a choice, as far as is practical, about things such as decoration and furniture. All of our young people, to varying degrees, take responsibility for looking after their environment and as a result we experience very little deliberate damage. The house has a 'homely' feel to it and, while we welcome friends and visitors, we strive to create an orderly, calm environment in which children can feel safe.

The children's homes in Sunderland have also benefited from a service level agreement with the Child and Family Unit, CAMHS at Sunderland Royal Hospital, a member of the team attending staff meetings on a fortnightly basis.

All members of staff within the homes have been trained in Therapeutic Crisis Intervention (TCI) over the last two years. This training has also been done by our Residential Services Managers. TCI brings together a number of ways of managing behaviour, for example: managing the environment, setting clear expectations and consequences, using behaviour management strategies such as planned ignoring and rewarding desirable behaviour, and use of the life space interview. The life space interview provides a very useful tool for staff in helping young people to solve problems, thus empowering them and helping to increase their self esteem.

All of these factors above have helped us to provide a stable environment in which individuals can live and work.

However, the young people that we look after have a wide range of different needs and can, at times, present extremely challenging behaviour, which places significant demands on our staff team. Many of the strategies used for 'managing' behaviour, including TCI, do not involve the young person in any real sense of participation. Previous staff training was very much about the staff going away from the home and participating in a course, then returning to practise what had been learned in the home. Many of us felt that we should be able to conduct a life space interview without the child being aware that it was happening. The process should be seamless and invisible. Although the aim of the life space interview was to allow the child to come up with his/her own solution, we had problems in moving staff away from the role of helper and rescuer; the person who would provide the solution, who had all the answers and who had the authority. This could lead to a situation where it was the young person who had the 'problem' and the adult member of staff who possessed the answer. Hence the adult could feel justified in pointing out to the young person the

error of his or her ways.

As a staff group, we concentrated a lot on problem behaviour and how we (not necessarily the young person) could solve the situation. Many of the solutions were about control: using sanctions to persuade young people to behave in the way we wanted. With some young people this works and the problem is solved; however, with some young people no amount of sanctions and rewards will achieve compliance and they continue to resist the efforts of adults to modify their behaviour.

Much of our handover time was spent discussing problem behaviour. The result of this was twofold. Firstly, staff became very anxious about their apparent lack of control and would want 'something to be done' about a situation which they found hard to tolerate (presumably because it undermined their own feelings of competence). Secondly, we started to lose sight of the young person as a whole individual and began thinking of them in terms of his/her 'problem' behaviour. This generated feelings of lack of trust and hostility between the young person and the staff. The consequence of this is often a power struggle, which may manifest itself as open aggression or behind the scenes manipulation (or both). It was particularly demoralising for the oncoming staff that this dialogue was taking place at the beginning of a shift and the children would become very agitated at the prospect of their behaviour being talked about.

The relationship dynamic underpinning this seemed to be one where the staff were perceived as competent, emotionally self-contained and able to cope, and the child conversely was not competent, not able to cope and in need of help. (I'm OK, you're not OK). Hence the staff felt responsible for controlling children's behaviour and for managing the environment, a task that also provokes stress and anxiety.

Of course, as adults who are in a parenting role, we do have a huge part to play in managing the environment that our young people live in and we work in. However, this is a skill that is vital for our young people to learn and is one of the hardest to teach. Most workers in residential care will have talked about 'life skills' training and how necessary it is. So often, however, it is seen in terms of practical skills such as cooking, and is not about learning to be responsible and to manage relationships. For example, we have all seen young people leave care to go to their own accommodation and lose their tenancy within a matter of weeks because the place has become open house for friends and then anyone who decides to drop in and stay.

Part of the reason that these young people fail is, possibly, because they have not learned how to control their own environment and the relationships within it. How do we equip young people with the skills to act assertively and effectively

manage relationships not just with family and partners but with the people they encounter in their lives on a day to day basis? As a staff group, we started to look much more closely at whether our decisions and behaviour really enhanced the young people's ability to handle situations or whether it took power and responsibility away from them and thus decreased their feelings of self-esteem and competence.

We found that it often felt uncomfortable to give children and young people responsibility and to allow them to make mistakes because it increased the element of risk. If the young person didn't handle the situation well, we would feel as if we should have stepped in. The awareness of risk assessment, child protection and being held responsible when something goes wrong makes it much more comfortable to take the task of dealing with a situation away from the young person and sort it out ourselves or simply say, "You can't do it"!

For example, periodically, we have a problem with one young person bullying another for money; pocket money or clothing money. Members of staff are very aware that this is happening and do their best to prevent it. One of our strategies was to supervise the potential victim in spending his/her money, which means that a member of staff would go to the shops with the young person. Of course this 'help' is not going to assist the young person at all in the long term and also undermines his/her self esteem, as well as, possibly, reinforcing his/her role as victim. Instead, using TCI problem-solving, we role-played handling the situation and it worked. We still found, however, that we tended to return to the position where the young person was dependent and we sorted things out for him/her.

Another example was the task of answering the front door. Our young people much preferred to leave this to the staff on duty, particularly if they did not wish to see the person at the door. They would tell the member of staff to tell X to go away (sometimes as bluntly as that, sometimes worse!), thus getting out of speaking to their friends and telling them, politely but firmly, that they were staying in, washing their hair or whatever. We had many staff meetings where we talked about making sure that young people answered the door themselves and spoke to their friends and that we did not do it for them. However, we seemed repeatedly to fall back into the previous roles where the staff in effect 'policed' the environment and the young people were passive, unassertive and refused to take responsibility for their relationships.

Members of staff were frequently put in the position where some of the young people would demand that a particular visitor was banned from the premises. This was usually for name-calling or similar unpleasantness. As staff we would become drawn into these minor disputes and once again were thrust into the role of enforcer of rules. Young people would then proceed to undermine the 'ban'

that they had requested by speaking to the person in question. They absolved themselves of any responsibility by blaming the staff for imposing the ban and acting as if it had nothing to do with them! This served once again to reinforce the roles of staff as controllers and young people as passive and unassertive.

Although we were able to back off from answering the door and to be careful not to be drawn into excluding visitors on behalf of young people, we struggled with how to teach understanding of other people's feelings and what it might feel like to be the person whom they excluded. There were also the feelings of the members of staff who found this situation stressful and wearing.

Of course, learning to take responsibility for oneself, building appropriate relationships with others and establishing an identity for oneself are primary tasks of adolescence. For most children, the transition from being dependent to being independent and responsible for him- or herself takes place over many years and begins a long time before they hit their teen years. Our young people have often grown up being powerless in their relationships and with no positive dialogue with their carer(s) about themselves. Although we had achieved a high degree of stability and order within the home, we were still struggling to alter the fundamental relationship between staff and young people.

At the same time that we were struggling with the dynamics of our group, staff and young people, we were fortunate to be asked to take part in a pilot scheme to run the Nurturing Programme in our children's home.

The Family Links Nurturing Programme

The Family Links Nurturing Programme (Family Links Website) is a structured 10-week course relevant to all children and to the adults responsible for their upbringing. It explores the emotional needs behind children's behaviour and offers a consistent approach to behaviour management. The programme was originally developed by Dr. Stephen Bavolek, a psychologist interested in the prevention of child abuse and neglect and the development of family education (Nurturing Parenting Website). Family Links have built on Bavolek's work to develop a package for use in schools in the UK, and it was this whole school mainstream programme which we used in the children's home.

The theoretical base for the programme is eclectic, using both cognitive and affective activities. The programme is based on the belief that everyone can improve their self-esteem and learn appropriate behaviour for successful relationships. The key to the effectiveness of the programme is the premise that the way other people behave towards us affects our self-esteem and the way we, in turn, behave towards others. This is, of course, particularly so during

childhood; children who feel valued will learn to value themselves and to value others too.

The aims of the programme are to:

- promote emotional literacy and emotional health in adults and children
- raise self-esteem
- develop communication and social skills
- empower children to make responsible choices
- teach positive ways of resolving disruption and conflict
- create a safe, calm environment.

Family Links gave this project every support and encouragement. It was agreed that the programme could be adjusted to meet the particular needs of the young people and staff of the home; however, we found that the programme needed very little change. Separate, parallel groups were run for the young people and adults. The young people were offered the sessions which are run with classes in schools. We debated whether to offer the staff the two day training which is run for staff in school or to run the ten week parents' programme. We opted for the latter in recognition of the demanding caring role which the staff undertake.

The groups ran on Monday afternoons, with a break for half term. The staff group was held between 1.30 p.m. and 3.30 p.m. and the young person's group ran for an hour as soon as they were all home from school, usually from 4.00 p.m. to 5.00 p.m. We decided not to have a fixed starting time for the young people as they found it difficult to wait, and would wave us into the room as soon as everyone was assembled. It felt respectful to respond to their request to begin.

The groups complemented each other in that both had the same format and routine with warm up games, a topic or topics for consideration, and goodbye rituals. The session themes were common to both groups, albeit presented in different ways. For instance, time was spent in both groups considering praise and criticism, choices and consequences, and personal power and self esteem.

The facilitators' perspective

Helping to run these groups has been such a powerful experience that it is difficult to try to record the experience on paper. Numerous points come to mind, the most salient being that it has been a privilege to work in the children's home and that we have learnt a tremendous amount from the people who live

and work there.

We felt that this project succeeded for several reasons, one of the most important being the preparation done by our supervisor, Shirley Morgan, and the manager of the home, Helen Fay. Attendance at the group was voluntary. Debbie and I were concerned that the young people would opt out before we had the chance to engage them. We certainly had strong competition in the form of television, cigarettes and visiting boys! In recognition of this, it was arranged that the young people would have a take-away on group nights. This predisposed the young people to anticipate the group in a favourable light. Although ordering the food was not conditional on attending the group, we felt that it set the scene for the nurturing programme.

It was also arranged for a temporary member of staff to be in the home during the staff group sessions. This ensured that all the permanent staff could attend the groups, even if there were young people home from school.

It was very valuable to have the two groups led by the same facilitators. Debbie and I felt that we gained a lot of credibility with the staff because they could see for themselves how powerful the Nurturing Programme approach was in helping the young people to gain an insight into their feelings and behaviours.

In fact, this was one of the things that surprised and delighted us about the project; we know that the material was good, and we had been impressed by the results of the programme in schools. However, we had not anticipated how powerful it would be to offer the groups to looked after young people, who had experienced such a difficult start to their lives. We were repeatedly moved and humbled by their honesty and insight.

For instance, when considering feelings, they were initially surprised and a little bemused by the Nurturing Programme message that all feelings are valid and acceptable, however, as we worked through the activities, they recognized that it is not wrong to be frightened when in danger, angry when experiencing injustice or sad at the loss of a loved one. They went on to have a mature discussion about the different and often destructive ways in which they handle difficult feelings, frequently hurting themselves or others in the process. They were able to suggest safe ways of dealing with emotions such as anger and were very respectful of their individual differences. For instance, when one girl said that she could telephone a friend and talk it through, another said that for herself that would still be an unhelpful strategy because she would probably pick a fight with her friend on the phone.

One of the most important and enjoyable parts of the groups was the games. For both the staff and the young people it proved very cohesive to have fun

together. An unplanned bonus the first week was that one of the young people who was home from school could hear the gales of laughter coming from the staff group and was very curious to see what all the laughter had been about. While we had a contract with each group about confidentiality, it had been agreed that some information could be shared. The young people were pleased by the idea that they were playing the same games as the staff, and it was helpful for both groups to know that they had focused on the same issues. In this way a common nurturing language began to emerge.

A particularly poignant group for me was the session in which we played 'The Nurturing Game'. This game 'teaches adults and children to express their feelings, to become aware of themselves and others, to use their personal power in positive ways, to praise, to use gentle touch, and to get along better with others'. The young people played this with touching honesty, offering each other generous praise that they all appeared to enjoy. After a while one of them said 'it's like we are all a family here together, a second family. We can all look after each other'. They were delighted with this idea and the group ended very warmly. The staff have since told us that this has become a favourite game which staff and young people all enjoy playing together.

An indication of how important the group had become came in the sixth session when the young people asked if the group could be extended beyond the tenth week. We were very clear that this would not happen and after several attempts to persuade us otherwise our boundaries were reluctantly accepted. One of the girls then asked if she would be allowed to keep one of the small glass nuggets we had used each week as a symbol of all we had thought about together. She said that she would put it in her memory box. This felt very significant, as she had previously spoken about her memory box with considerable emotion.

The ending of the group proved to be very challenging for some of the young people and indeed for Debbie and me. While we had expected that the ending would be difficult for this particular group we had, perhaps naïvely, not anticipated the strength of feeling which would emerge. Some of the young people began to disengage from the eighth week onwards. They demonstrated this by turning up for the group late and when present by taking part at a polite but superficial level. All our attempts to recreate the warm, positive moments of previous weeks were unsuccessful. Debbie and we understood this as them rejecting us in anticipation of us rejecting them as the group ended. Two of the young women missed the last group altogether, leaving us with powerful feelings of an incomplete experience. We had both very much wanted a chance to say goodbye and to acknowledge the importance of the group for us, but this was denied us. Although we ended the group with the remaining youngsters, the final group was strangely flat and stilted,

perhaps the least satisfactory of all the weeks. This has been an important lesson and in planning future groups, we will pay more attention to the ending process, bearing it in mind from week one.

Both staff and young people reported significant positive change during the course of the group. The most frequent comments were that the home had become calmer and that people were nicer to each other. There was considerable interest in maintaining and building on the Nurturing Programme ethos. To this end it was jointly decided that Monday evenings would continue to be 'Nurturing' nights, with the staff on duty playing games with the young people, a chance to discuss any issues which might have arisen during the week and a take-away. It was also arranged that Debbie and I would visit each half term to join in the games and briefly revisit the Nurturing Programme topics. At the time of writing we have had one, very successful meeting.

The manager's perspective

The concept of a course that included both staff and young people was a novel one and we were very unsure of how well it would work. Maggie Bell and Debbie Ramsden, who facilitated the programme, attended one of our staff meetings to explain what the ten week course would be about. At this meeting there was a degree of negativity about the programme, which perhaps reflected the anxiety and fatigue felt by the staff group. This changed noticeably after the programme got underway. We had talked to the young people about the programme and had explained that they would, hopefully, enjoy it and find it fun. Part of the timetable would be a take-away meal after the young people's session for everyone, regardless of whether they attended the group or not. For the staff, the main aim of the course was the nurturing, an opportunity for the carers to be cared for.

The first week introduced the four constructs on which Stephen Bavolek based the Nurturing Programme. These constructs provide the key elements for successful relationships and confident parenting. The other subject covered in the first week was the power of praise. Praise is fundamental to the whole programme and is used throughout the ten weeks. Maggie and Debbie had brought with them a basket and a jar of glass beads. This was used every week with both groups to represent the praise that we gave to one another. While we do not propose to go through all ten sessions in this article, we will pick out what seemed to be the most important and reflect on how the course worked for us.

The four key constructs are: appropriate expectations; self-awareness and self-esteem; empathy; and positive discipline.

Appropriate expectations

Sometimes in residential care we get hung up on consistency and try to treat everyone the same. This stresses the importance of knowing what each child is capable of and altering our expectations accordingly. In residential care this often feels like a balancing act. It is so important to help young people understand why a particular decision has been made; why we might expect a sixteen year old to act differently to a twelve year old, for example. Sometimes we disagree within the staff group about what we think is appropriate; however, we think that we are succeeding in creating an understanding with young people that, although we sometimes get it wrong, we try always to be fair and put their interests first.

Self-awareness and self-esteem

Being sensitive to our own needs and taking responsibility for them helps us be more nurturing towards others. This really helped us all think about our own needs and looking after ourselves. Once you do that you realise how important it is to nurture others. Maggie and Debbie did a wonderful job in praising us and pointing out so many positives.

Empathy

Because the course ran simultaneously with staff and young people, we gained a real understanding of one another's feelings. It also developed empathy within the staff team itself and between young people. Both groups learned that they share very similar feelings and that it doesn't matter whether you are 15 or 50, we all get anxious, angry and upset at times.

Positive discipline

The nurturing programme uses three assumptions in relation to discipline:

- i) all behaviour has a reason
- ii) what we pay attention to is what we get more of
- iii) discipline needs to be firm, fair and consistent.

We had already established a sound framework within the home which went some way to fulfilling the requirements stated in the third assumption. The home operates a simple incentive scheme, which rewards 'good' behaviour with points and deducts them for poor behaviour. The system is transparent and fair.

The young people know what earns them points and will regularly check their 'points' sheets to check that members of staff have awarded points appropriately. The other aspects of positive discipline were developed more fully as the course progressed. However, the statement 'what you pay attention to is what you get more of' has become something of a yardstick and has helped a lot when 'discussing the behaviour of our young people. When we are talking about the young people, we now ask ourselves whether we are paying attention to a piece of behaviour we want to stop. Obviously there is some behaviour that cannot be ignored, but by paying less attention to the behaviour and more to the young person as a whole, we are able to maintain a much more positive perspective which is reflected in the way the young person sees him- or herself. Handovers have become less fraught as there is less emphasis on negative behaviour. The staff are managing to hang on to a much more balanced view of the young people and this has helped to lower anxiety levels, particularly for those commencing a shift. This has had the result of bringing down the emotional temperature in the house and contributing to a calmer atmosphere.

The programme also includes sessions on personal power and making responsible choices. This has helped to break down the children's perception of the adults as being authoritarian and in control, and helped them (the young people) to see us as individuals with feelings and to see themselves as having personal power which they can choose to use responsibly.

Conclusion

For the adults, we think that it has been quite liberating to acknowledge that our young people are capable of exercising power in a positive manner and that we don't need to be in control all of the time. We are more able to share our own feelings of vulnerability and experiences with the young people and they appear to value what they are hearing. This in itself is a fundamental shift in attitudes because it suggests that the children are now acknowledging and validating the emotions of adults instead of dismissing us as people who don't understand and don't have similar feelings to themselves.

Our young people speak very positively about the effects of the programme. They particularly enjoyed meeting Maggie and Debbie and we think it helped that the staff and young people were both doing the course at the same time. Several of the young people have commented that the home is calmer to live in now. The behaviour of one young woman has moderated, although it still has its moments! However, the other young people now seem far less upset and intimidated by her outbursts and we are sure this is due to the programme helping them (and us) to understand how she feels about things. She was one of the most positive and active members of the young people's group.

Comments from the staff also reflect what the young people have said; however, what most members of staff have talked about is the nurturing aspect of the course and how it made them think about looking after themselves. What all of us felt at the end of the programme was that we didn't want it to stop and could we have more of it please?

Building on the success of the pilot, a joint training initiative has been set up to train five residential social workers initially, with another five to follow, so that they will be able to deliver the programme in other children's homes. An important aspect of this is that residential workers will have ownership of the programme when it is delivered in the future.

References

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