

Residential care and sexual exploitation: is restraint the answer?

Watching the recent Stephen Nolan show regarding the ongoing police investigation into allegations about the possible sexual exploitation of 22 young people who have gone missing from residential care in the last 18 months, I was struck by the fact that the discussion centred on panel participants providing a 'yes/no' answer to the question 'can care workers restrain young people to prevent them leaving care homes when there are real concerns about the risks they may be exposed to?'

Although based on the understandable desire to find a quick and effective solution to address the problem, setting the parameters of the discussion in this way does a disservice to everyone involved. The public may well be left with the impression that, once again (bearing in mind the horrific examples of historical institutional abuse), residential homes can never deliver on their promise to safeguard the well being of the young people they care for; that living in residential care increases the risk of a young person being sexually exploited; that care workers are ineffective and that being in care equates with having been sexually exploited. The reality is, of course, far more complicated than these sound bites.

There are 41 children's homes in Northern Ireland, which provide care for about 250 children and young people. There are also 9 other residential homes that provide respite and longer term care for disabled children¹. Of the 41 children's homes most young people enter residential care when they are in secondary school and most stay there for short periods of time and often return home. Given the numbers that the police are concentrating their investigation on, it is clear that the focus is not all young people in residential care and neither is it all children's homes.

The role of residential care in parenting the young people it looks after has been the focus of recent policy and practice initiatives. In May 2013 the DHSSPS published draft *Minimum Care Standards for Children's Homes*, which have been developed with the involvement of children and young people. The consultation on the 21 standards, which build on previous standards (DHSSPS, 2005), closed in September

¹ DHSSPS (2013) Children in care in Northern Ireland

2013. The new standards will strengthen the role of the *Regulation and Quality Improvement Authority* in its legal duty to inspect all residential units.

The publication of new standards, recent regional guidance regarding police involvement in residential units when children go missing² and the introduction of therapeutic approaches within homes across Northern Ireland³ indicate that there has been a lot of work behind the scenes that has involved both children and young people in care and a wide range of agencies to improve the policies and practices associated with residential child care in Northern Ireland. It is not the case therefore that over the last 18 months, the period covered by the police investigation, that nothing has been happening.

The views of the children and young people involved in drafting the new standards indicate that they value residential care and that they want ‘the home to be their home, to be homely and similar to those of their friends not in care’⁴ We also know from surveys about their views, that most young people experience residential care as a good place, value their relationships with their care workers and that their time in residential care has helped them deal with their problems.

We also know that there are care workers who have gone ‘over and beyond’ what is expected of them to make connections with young people in attempts to address risks in their lives. It is therefore not the case that all attempts by care workers have been ineffective. Within this context; one of the issues that needs to be carefully considered is whether being in residential care *per se* has increased the risk to young people being sexually exploited or whether in fact there is no observable difference in the level of risk to them whether they live in foster homes, the homes of family, friends or in residential care.

Underpinning young people’s positive experiences of residential care is one common element – the development of trusting, consistent and meaningful relationships with

² HSCNI/PSNI (2011) *Regional Guidance. Police Involvement in Residential Units. Safeguarding of Children Missing from Home and Foster Care.*

³ SCIE (2012) *Therapeutic Approaches to Social Work in Residential Child Care Settings.*

⁴ DHSSPS (2013) *Minimum Standards for Children’s Homes* (p. 4)

staff. If we think about our own families and our wider communities it is only within the context of trusting, positive and meaningful relationships that opportunities are forged to effectively educate, reason with and role model the knowledge and skills required with children and young people to help them identify and manage risk effectively and appropriately.

Fundamentally the aim of residential care is also to provide these opportunities. It can be time consuming and resource intensive to build relationships. It can be very difficult to 'reach' children and young people when they have had few positive relationships in their families and their communities. Restraining young people is traumatic for them, an intrusion into their private space and maybe experienced like another violation of their person. It is almost certainly unlikely to be experienced by them as providing a platform for the development of meaningful relationships. The process is also traumatic for staff and places them at much greater risk of complaint and investigation. It cannot be relied on as an effective and reliable intervention for preventing risk of exposure to sexual exploitation and is not a solution.

Indeed there are no 'quick fix' solutions but what will help are opportunities for professionals in social care, health, education and other settings to build better relationships with children and young people and the development of a shared sense of responsibility, across agencies and communities towards the children and young people living in our areas.

The recently established Safeguarding Board Northern Ireland has a vital role and its newly published guides on sexual exploitation have been developed on a model of shared professional responsibility and effective working relationships between professionals. Translating these into the daily practices of people who work in settings with children requires more opportunities for adults and children to develop trusting, respectful and meaningful relationships. Supporting the development of these requires resources to train, support and make available to children and young people the right person, in the right place at the right time.

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