

Restorative approaches in residential child care

Introduction

In recent years there has been growing interest in the use of restorative approaches in residential child care settings, based on the philosophy and practice of restorative justice. This interest has been informed by developments elsewhere across children's services and concerned with care, education and justice.

Youth justice reform has provided the impetus for a review of risk factors and preventative factors impacting on youth offending, how youth offending is dealt with and, by extension, what preventative strategies are needed to deter potential offenders. Educational initiatives to address bullying, anti-social and disruptive behaviour and poor attendance have given rise to national training programmes and guidance for schools. These strands encompass a concern for children and young people's safety and welfare; a concern for what is perceived as increasing anti-social behaviour among young people; a need to find effective ways of dealing with these problems; and a growing realisation that working **with** young people and listening to their needs and to their ideas may provide the key.¹

The development of multi-agency and partnership working has led to the cross-fertilisation of ideas from a variety of philosophies, working practices and experience. Two government White Papers, *Every Child Matters*² and *Youth Matters*,³ set out guidelines for ensuring a partnership approach across all agencies working with young people, focusing on five key areas:

- being healthy
- staying safe
- enjoying and achieving
- making a positive contribution
- economic wellbeing.

*Care Matters: Time for Change*⁴ focused on the specific needs of children who are looked after by the state and the Children and Young Persons Bill⁵ sets in place legislation to ensure that the issues flagged up by the White Paper are addressed, with particular emphasis on the need for the voice of the young people themselves to be heard.

The restorative justice approach to dealing with conflict, anti-social behaviour and criminal behaviour has been increasingly used in schools and in the youth justice field since the late 1990s, and in recent years the approach has been trialled with adult offenders. Evaluations of this approach have been positive and suggest that the opportunity for offenders to meet with those against whom they have offended, in a facilitated meeting, can make an impact on their future offending behaviour and also meet the

needs of victims for closure.⁶⁻⁹ The reduction in reoffending behaviour has been one of the reasons why those working in the looked-after sector have been drawn to restorative justice.¹⁰

Statistics show that young people in residential child care are disproportionately represented in the criminal justice arena.^{3, 11, 12} This situation has arisen not necessarily because children in care are more likely to offend but because, in the absence of effective alternatives, the response of care staff to extremely disruptive behaviour has often been to call the police, who, when they arrive, are obliged (again, in the absence of effective alternatives) to deal with the behaviour as if it were a crime.¹¹ It has been argued that using a restorative approach instead can divert children in care from the criminal justice system by ensuring that the incident is dealt with by staff in such a way that both wrongdoer and those affected reach a mutually agreed way forward without recourse to the police.¹⁰

This reasoning was the rationale behind the introduction of a formal process called 'restorative conferencing' into certain children's care homes several years ago. This process is predicated on a model that usually involves both 'victim' and 'offender' (*sic*) meeting in the company of their immediate community (parents or carers) and anyone else directly affected by the incident. All those present recount their perspective on the situation, their feelings, what they need to enable them to move on as individuals and how to put things right. Soft evidence suggests that this formal process can be highly effective. It requires time for preparation since the facilitator needs to meet with each participant individually before the meeting, which can itself be quite lengthy.

Staff in residential child care settings soon discovered that this more formal process was less useful than they had hoped, because most of the incidents they needed to address flared up quickly and required immediate attention. They requested training in a range of less formal processes, which were, nevertheless, informed by the philosophy of restorative justice.¹³ Their experiences in using these processes have gradually led to a realisation that the approach requires a cultural shift in the way staff and young people interact on a day-to-day basis and that the benefits of using this approach go far beyond the narrow remit of reducing potentially offending behaviour.

The benefits of a restorative approach

In her study of the uses of restorative justice in residential child care, Willmott¹⁰ reports benefits to both staff and young people when restorative approaches are used in conflicts and

disagreements. ‘Many of the contacts described restorative justice as being “empowering” for all parties involved, helping all sides in a conflict or dispute to have their say on what had happened and giving them a stake in how the situation might best be resolved and reparation made.’

Willmott recognises the sense of empowerment staff feel in having a wider range of options when dealing with challenging behaviour. She notes that young people’s behaviour began to change: ‘It was felt that the young people were starting to take more responsibility for their own behaviour. Indeed, some contacts noted that there were occasions when the young people themselves used some of the principles of restorative justice in sorting out their own minor disagreements with other residents or staff.’

In their review of research showing what works best in children’s homes, Clough, Bullock and Ward¹⁴ report that the quality of the relationship between staff and children, and also between the children themselves, is a key factor in successful practice in both fostering and residential child care. Clough,¹⁵ drawing on a summary of research made by Parker,¹⁶ notes that the daily life of children in care must revolve around their best interests – child-orientated rather than institution-orientated.

Clough¹⁵ cites certain key factors in developing resident-centred practice, including: daily life in the home built from an attempt to produce systems that best match residents’ wants and needs, making time to listen to individual residents, and involving residents in negotiations about life in the home.

Berridge¹⁷ adds that the most effective staff have an informal approach with young people, are easy to talk to, listen to young people with respect, and are frank and challenging but not ‘pushy’ or ‘nagging’. Restorative approaches do not have the monopoly in this way of interacting with children but they can provide a structure and a confidence in dealing with issues, particularly challenging ones.

Team morale and confidence are raised when staff are given a structure in which to deal with challenging situations. Low morale can lead to high staff turnover in an environment where stability and consistency are vital. Cooper¹⁸ notes that: ‘turnover in the children’s workforce is especially important compared to other sectors. This issue has a strong bearing on continuity of care: children and young people are particularly vulnerable to changes in relationships built up with adults.’

Underpinning values, principles and skills of a restorative approach

This section is adapted from two recent works by Hopkins, which refer to schools.^{1, 19}

The contribution that restorative training makes is to indicate how key values, principles and skills can be applied in a consistent and congruent way even when staff find themselves faced with difficult and challenging situations. The starting point comes with an important mindset shift in approaching conflict and wrongdoing. The key to a restorative encounter is a focus on the harm that has happened rather than who is to blame, coupled with a desire to empower those involved to repair the harm by giving them ownership of the problem and its resolution.

A restorative approach in a care setting shifts the emphasis from managing behaviour to focusing on building, nurturing and repairing relationships. Behaviour management policies tend to focus on the behaviour of young people and usually include reference to sanctions in the event of rule breaking. These sanctions have the potential to harm the crucial adult–child relationship. A restorative care home would need, in contrast, a *relationship* management policy, which considers the needs and responsibilities of every member of that community towards each other.²⁰

The development of such a policy is informed by the values and principles of a restorative approach, such as openness, self-determination, collaboration, flexibility, equality, non-discrimination, non-violence, fairness, respect, empowerment, trust, honesty, voluntarism, healing, personal accountability, inclusiveness and accountability.^{21–23} These values are reflected in many of the findings from Clough, Bullock and Ward.¹⁴

Several authors have described what is needed for young people and adults to engage in a restorative approach to conflict and challenging behaviour in care settings: a willingness to listen to others’ perspectives on a situation and suspend the notion that there is only one way of looking at something;²⁴ an ability to listen to the feelings and needs behind others’ words, especially if these words are offensive, hurtful or accusatory;²⁵ an ability to be in touch with their own feelings and needs in order to express them in a way that is heard and understood by others;²⁵ and a commitment to giving everyone a chance to share their story.²⁶ Many of these skills are identified by Clough, Bullock and Ward as key to best practice in residential child care.¹⁴

Restorative approaches in practice

Staff in residential child care settings need a range of flexible strategies for dealing with the day-to-day conflicts and challenges of living and working with young people.¹³ Young people will learn from staff ways of dealing with conflict and anger arising from challenging situations both in the care setting and in other situations, including work settings, socially with friends and as parents themselves.

Hopkins writes that the key to dealing with all these situations lies in keeping key restorative values and principles in mind, remaining curious and open to the young person’s perspective, needs and feelings; and encouraging him or her to take responsibility for finding ways forward that include the needs of all those who are affected by the situation.¹⁹

Staff trained in restorative methods attest to the value of keeping in mind five key questions, which inform all restorative interventions, whether informal, used in the moment, in one-to-one settings or among groups of young people in conflict:

- What’s happened?
- What were you thinking as this happened? And now?
- What were you feeling at the time? And now?

- Who else has been affected by what has happened?
- How can the harm caused be repaired?¹⁹

This contrasts with a more punitive framework which consists in reflections such as: I need to get to the bottom of this (with the focus on fact finding and gathering witness statements); I must find out who is to blame; I must deter and punish the culprits so that they will not do the same thing again.

Culture change

For some care homes the adoption of a restorative approach is simply a question of giving a structure and a name to a range of strategies that have been used informally already. For others it provides a fresh opportunity to review the ethos and culture of the home and strive for consistency and best practice.²⁷

‘Children assisted to develop socially acceptable behaviour through encouragement of acceptable behaviour and constructive staff response to inappropriate behaviour’ is the outcome heading for National Minimum Standard 22.²⁸ Sanctions are mentioned in Standard 22.4 and this is often interpreted by staff as an endorsement of a rewards and sanctions-based behaviour management system to encourage pro-social behaviour and deter anti-social behaviour. A critique of a rewards and sanctions-based approach, shared by a restorative view, is that in a system promoting punishment and rewards, a behaviour, whether ‘good’ or ‘bad’, helpful or harmful, becomes associated with the negative or positive consequence administered by those in authority. It relies on others to order the environment. There is a separation of behaviour and responsibility. Punishment and rewards then, cushion people from the impact of their actions and deprive them of the opportunity to develop empathy and compassion and, when things go wrong, to put things right.¹⁹ It should be noted that reparation and restitution are included in the National Minimum Standards (22.3).

At Bessels Leigh School, a residential school for boys, one reason for exploring restorative approaches was the realisation that staff were expending a lot of energy in trying to enforce a punishment system that was being increasingly challenged by the young people.²⁷ Similarly, other homes and schools have been faced by the challenge of young people growing older and ceasing to value the ‘carrots’ offered for good behaviour. Kohn reported that the currency of punishments and rewards can become increasingly worthless and less and less effective.²⁹

Using restorative approaches to address harmful behaviours and to develop pro-social communities in the first place by using regular circles, can encourage the development of an intrinsic morality, a sense of community and civic spirit, empathy and, very importantly, a sense of belonging and connectedness, which is vital if young people in care are to develop pro-social skills and attitudes.²⁷ Circles involve residents and staff sitting together with an agreed set of guidelines for listening respectfully to each other without interruption. Regular, possibly daily, circle meetings enable everyone to reflect on how they are, how

their behaviour (positive or negative) is impacting on everyone else, and how everyone can support each other in living and working together.^{30, 31}

Implementation

The use of restorative approaches in youth settings is relatively new but, where they are being used, there have been enthusiastic responses and an increasing number of providers of services are exploring their potential in schools, pupil referral units and care settings, especially residential child care.^{10, 13, 32, 33, 34}

It makes good sense to develop a coherent restorative strategy in a locality so that the way in which young people and situations are dealt with is consistent among the adults with whom they live, and among those responsible for their academic, vocational and social education, and other services.¹⁷ One key to effective implementation is support beyond the home/school gate, not just of an isolated initiative, but in terms of a locality-wide strategy that is adequately funded over several years. Another key to effective implementation in care settings, at the level of the home itself, is to have the senior managers on board, fully trained and using these skills with both staff and young people. Restorative values and principles imply a certain leadership style.¹³ In contrast, factors such as high staff turnover, new management, recent other new initiatives or changes can militate against effective implementation. Restorative approaches have been shown to decrease these negative factors.¹⁰

Culture change takes time and the initial training of staff – usually over five to six days – must be seen only as the first step. It is crucial to maintain momentum, both strategically and operationally, and training needs to be ongoing with a strategy to train all new staff. Initial training involves developing a range of flexible skills to use in a variety of situations, from informal and spontaneous, to formal, involving individual preparation with all those involved. In training, participants get the chance to practise having restorative chats involving two people, facilitating face-to-face meetings with two people in conflict and running larger meetings, possibly involving everyone in the home, and sometimes even parents and/or representatives from the wider community. On completion of training, staff need to begin using the approach but also to review their previous procedures, record keeping and protocols.³⁵

Conclusion

Restorative approaches provide strategies that accord with recent studies of what works best in care settings.¹⁴ Research into those homes using restorative approaches suggests benefits to both staff and young people.^{10, 13} These approaches have been consistently found to address the agendas of the three government White Papers: *Every Child Matters*, *Youth Matters* and *Care Matters*.²⁻⁴

Recent research suggests that restorative theories that pertain to criminal justice settings may need to be re-evaluated in the context of residential child care settings.¹⁰ Each context is different, with different needs and different challenges. The

looked-after children sector is evolving its own version of the restorative approach and may well offer deeper insights and understandings across children's services, as it has a tradition of doing.

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