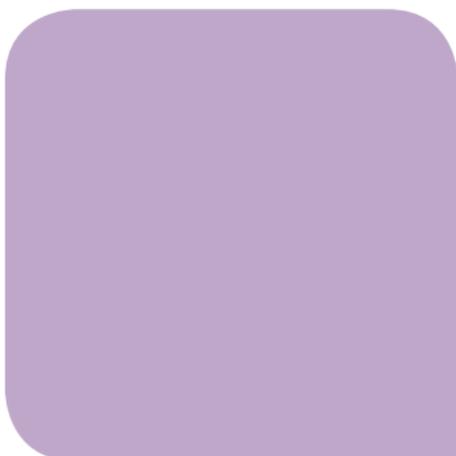
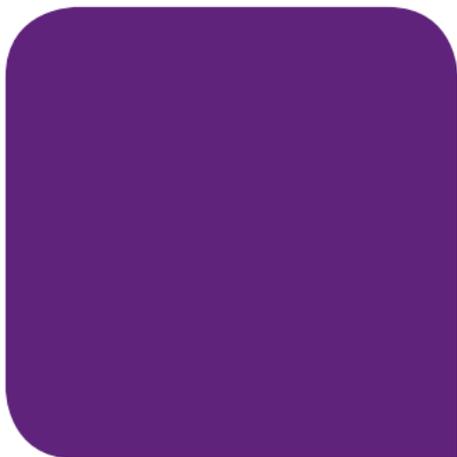


Working with challenging and disruptive situations in residential child care: Sharing effective practice



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Introduction

The children's residential care sector across the UK has changed markedly over the past two decades and more. These changes have occurred for many reasons, including: a series of scandals concerning the physical and sexual abuse of residents by staff; difficulties in recruiting skilled staff; a perceived lack of effectiveness in achieving good outcomes for young people; and the relatively high cost of providing residential care. During this time, children's residential care has also come under a great deal of scrutiny, including several major inquiries in different parts of the UK.

One impact of these changes has been a greatly reduced residential sector, with the proportion of looked-after children who are placed in residential care declining over this period. Now, approximately 11–12 per cent of children in public care in England and in Northern Ireland, mostly teenagers, are cared for in children's homes. Most of these young people will have experienced considerable difficulties prior to becoming resident. Providing a caring and nurturing environment that meets the needs of young people presents a considerable challenge

to both commissioners and providers of residential child care services. It requires a staff group who have the skills, experience, motivation and support to work with a group of troubled young people in an environment that may be stressful.

An issue of some concern reported frequently by managers and staff in residential care is that of 'keeping order' – of dealing appropriately with disruptive and challenging situations that arise within children's homes. It was to address this concern that in 2006 the Social Care Institute for Excellence (SCIE) commissioned this knowledge review. The overall aim of the knowledge review was to identify what is known about effective working with challenging and disruptive situations in residential care. More specifically, it sought to address the following questions:

- What are the nature, incidence and social context of challenging and disruptive situations in children's residential care?
- What are the possible causes and effects of these situations?
- Which young people and staff are associated with, involved in and affected by these situations?
- What promotes effective practice in dealing with challenging situations?

Methodology

The knowledge review was comprised of a research review and a practice survey and was undertaken by a team from three institutions: Queen's University Belfast (QUB), the University of Bristol (UoB) and the National Children's Bureau (NCB). QUB coordinated the project and in collaboration with NCB took responsibility for the practice survey, while the team from Bristol undertook the research review. To provide guidance and support to the project team, two advisory groups were established, one of professionals working in the area of children's residential care and one of care-experienced young people. In consultation with the professional advisory group it was agreed that while the research review would be international in its focus, the practice survey would relate largely to Northern Ireland, but be informed by some contextual information drawn from England.

The research review required extending a systematic research review approach to the field of social work practice. The SCIE guidelines to systematic knowledge reviews (SCIE, 2003) were applied and Ian Sinclair, University of York, was employed as a consultant to provide overall advice and comment on draft reports. Throughout the study the parameters of the work, its design and methodology were agreed with the professional advisory group and with SCIE. In this context there was much discussion

around the meaning and definition of challenging behaviour and situations which led to the terms 'anti-social' and 'disturbing behaviour' being the preferred terminology for the research review.

The systematic review process itself involved full electronic searching of 18 databases as well as additional hand searches. The database searches came up, initially, with some 19,000 publications; excluding duplicates, the number of unique references was nearer 10,000. The title and abstracts of these were screened in terms of broad relevance to the task, leading to the elimination of over 9,000. Full text screening was undertaken of the remainder using clear inclusion/exclusion criteria. This eventually resulted in 62 studies. A further standardised schedule was then designed to undertake quality appraisal of the studies and data extraction. Within the parameters that were set, in the past 20 years only 34 publications from 33 studies were located in the international literature in which the robustness was sufficient to allow them to be included in the review.

In the tender document it had been specified that the practice survey should focus on Northern Ireland where there was a scarcity of research. As with other jurisdictions within the UK, residential child care in Northern Ireland has seen significant changes over the past two decades. These changes have been underpinned by a raft of legislative and policy developments. Key in the developments have been the *Children (NI) Order*

(1995) (DHSSPS, 1996), the report on residential care in Northern Ireland *Children Matter*, (DHSS, 1998) and the associated Children Matter Task Force (DHSSPS, 2001) and more recently *Care Matters in Northern Ireland: A bridge to a better future* (DHSSPS, 2007). These documents have resulted in a gradual shift in thinking so that residential care provision is increasingly seen as an integral part of the wider child welfare system.

Information was gathered for the practice survey from a variety of sources, which included desk-based analysis of policy documents, a mapping exercise of challenging situations in residential child care in Northern Ireland, interviews and focus groups with a wide range of people representing all those with a policy or practice interest in children's residential care and contextual information from England. To ensure that the views of residential care staff and young people were captured and in accordance with the proposal, five children's homes were invited to, and subsequently agreed to take part in, the practice survey. The homes were chosen following discussions with RQIA and Board managers and were selected on the basis that they best met the criteria of a high incidence of challenging situations and/or creative or innovative ways of working with challenging situations were being used.

In total, nine senior staff in government, health and social services Boards and Trusts, four staff

from the RQIA, 16 residential child care unit managers, 33 staff from residential children's homes and 18 young people from the same homes participated in the practice survey.

Findings

The findings from the research review and the practice survey are essentially complementary, although there are instances of divergence possibly related to the differences of emphasis and approach. The research review reported on literature that met clearly defined criteria and included a variety of different research methodologies. In contrast, the practice survey was a qualitative study that sought the views of participants specifically on the causes and management of challenging situations and was, therefore, subjective in nature. This may have resulted in the practice survey having a more negative tone and a greater emphasis on the more aggressive, anxiety-provoking types of challenging behaviours. It was also noted in the research review that there was an identified paucity of material, particularly the evaluations of interventions and rigorously designed studies on effective practice.

Both elements of the knowledge review combine to provide a comprehensive picture of the diversity of challenging behaviour encountered in residential child care and the multifaceted nature of the factors involved. Additionally, they provide insight into the range and types of response to

the management of challenging behaviour, and the practice survey in particular provides a range of stakeholders' perspectives on the key aspects of effective practice. However, the lack of strong evidence on the effectiveness of specific interventions should be noted. Much evidence draws on the experience and perceptions of staff and users. Nonetheless, taken together, this knowledge review does provide evidence that within children's residential care, certain staff features and styles of working are most likely to minimise behavioural problems as well as benefit residents more generally.

Challenging situations and their triggers

Both the research review and the practice survey identified many different behaviours that were seen as challenging, ranging from defiance and non-compliance through to violence against staff, peers or self. However, it is important to note that the research review indicated that most residents do not pose major behavioural challenges to staff. The majority of homes are not experiencing constant disruption. There is something wrong if one is. Most residents are not school refusers although it appears that the problem of going missing from residential care has grown. There are particular problems with secure provision due to the nature of the environment and the circumstances of young people who are locked up. Importantly, there is evidence that the extent of behavioural problems is unrelated to intake – some homes contain and

engage successfully with very challenging young people, while the opposite also applies.

Serious incidents of violent behaviours are rare although it is these behaviours that were identified as the most challenging, particularly violence against staff. Acts of violence and concern about potential violence are especially anxiety-provoking and worrying at all levels. Staff also found the management of risky behaviours difficult, such as absconding and alcohol and drug use, due to uncertainty over their role. Other behaviours such as continuous defiance and non-compliance were also frequently mentioned by staff but did not appear to carry with them the same stress and apprehension.

A multitude of triggers was identified in both elements of the knowledge review. Factors relating to the young people themselves such as personal attributes and experiences were commonly referred to here as were factors relating to staff, although in the case of the latter these were most prominent in the research review.

Other identified triggers pertained to the actual environment in which the young people lived and here group dynamics were seen as key and were highlighted across the knowledge review. The hierarchies of peer groups and the negotiating of position within the group were ever-present sources of disruptive behaviour or peer violence.

This potential for peer conflict was further exacerbated when a newcomer was introduced into the group. Other triggers that emerged only in the practice survey and that are of particular relevance to Northern Ireland included the use of mobile phones, sectarianism and the paramilitaries.

Triggers associated with the system were regularly raised in the practice survey, although less so in the research review. These included the inability of homes to operate within their Statements of Purpose due to various factors, such as the shortage of places for young people and demands placed on managers to take emergency placements. These in turn had an impact on group dynamics and tended to be disruptive for all concerned. Issues associated with the system included the review process for looked-after children, contact with family, the institutionalised nature of some homes and associated, rigid rules and regulations – noted particularly by the young people.

Responding to challenging situations

The clearest message from the knowledge review overall is the major impact that certain staff features and styles of working can have on the effective management of challenging situations. It was suggested by young people and adults alike that it is only staff who are able to demonstrate a clear commitment to young people, listen to them and understand and

respect them, who are able to build relationships and who can therefore manage challenging situations and effectively defuse potentially disruptive behaviours. There is nothing new in this and these recommendations have long been rehearsed in the practice literature. The important task now is to explore the detail and provide refinement as to how this can be achieved.

Alongside the need to build relationships, and possibly given equal emphasis by participants in the practice survey, was the need for effective team working. A number of factors that enhanced this were identified including consistency, clear policies and procedures, regular team meetings and supervision, opportunities for team development and team debriefings to discuss issues, especially challenging situations when they occur. Other means of building a skilled team were identified as being: more targeted training and support for staff, contracting support from other professionals and increased staffing levels, although the research review found little evidence that this, per se, will increase effectiveness. Such strategies were reported to help develop staff morale and resilience which were seen by all as crucial for good practice in residential care.

Challenging behaviour seems to occur mainly during evenings and at night time. Staffing patterns, other resources and strategies should

take this into account. Staff appear to make inadequate use of prior information in order to understand and contend with anti-social behaviour. Responses should be more proactive than reactive. Imposition of sanctions is counterproductive when young people return from running away.

Additionally, the practice survey highlighted some other innovative preventative strategies that had been developed, two of which were: (i) engagement with other professionals and agencies, for example working with services for young people from the voluntary sector or using clinical psychologists on a consultancy basis; and (ii) outreach services to families and communities. This included shared care arrangements and specific work with children and families on key issues – such as non-attendance at school and family/foster care breakdown – as well as targeted efforts to engage with local communities and integrate young people into community life.

A raft of specific approaches and interventions were also referred to in the practice survey as being responses to challenging behaviour, the most common of these being therapeutic crisis intervention (TCI). This is hardly surprising since training in TCI has been introduced in all the four Board areas covering Northern Ireland. Other specific or systems approaches mentioned in the practice survey included restorative practice, restraint, police referral, juvenile justice

involvement, referral to secure accommodation and closing admissions to the unit when behaviours became too extreme. The use of each of these was often specific to the situation and all were described as having variable amounts of success.

A thorough evaluation of all these strategies would be extremely helpful in identifying their value and potential for impacting in residential care settings. However, the need for such evaluative research is especially true for TCI, which has been adopted in many children's homes across Northern Ireland but of which the research review found only two rigorous evaluations, and these presented mixed conclusions.

Implications for effective practice

Reviewing all the evidence available for the preparation of this knowledge review points to significant implications for practice in four key areas, presented here under the following headings:

- understanding residential care as a service
- having the 'right' staff team
- engaging with young people
- creating the knowledge base.

Each is explained in more detail overleaf.

Understanding residential care as a service

The essence of residential care is living within a group setting. It is unsurprising therefore that the strongest message from this research concerns the management of peer relationships and group dynamics. These were seen by all as a primary source of disruption, and that maintaining good order depends on effective management of these relationships. Important dimensions to consider are the size and make-up of the group (and relationships with staff, which will be considered later), and how that fits with the purpose of the unit. The implications of this for effective practice are:

- a need for a residential sector that offers a range of options, with clear differentiation in the needs addressed by units and with understanding of its role within the continuum of care
- adherence by senior managers to the agreed Statement of Purpose. This could be facilitated by having alternative options, for dealing with emergency admissions, such as specialist fostering
- greater control by unit managers over admissions to a unit so that due regard can be paid to the impact of new members on the resident group and their dynamics
- a need for units that are small, preferably fewer than six young people, thus reducing the potential for peer conflict and allowing for more focused attention on individual needs

- greater clarity and fuller understanding by all, including young people, of policy and procedures.

Having the 'right' staff team

Most young people who come into residential care will have experienced considerable difficulties and present a range of complex needs. Providing a nurturing environment that meets the needs of each young person can be challenging and stressful. Success depends on having the 'right' staff team, including effective managers. This knowledge review provides indications as to what constitutes the 'right' staff team:

- The primary requirement is staff that have the skills, qualities, attitudes and motivation to relate to young people and to build positive relationships with them. Recruiting staff principally on the basis of qualification and experience may not be sufficient. One way to enhance the assessment of the attitudes and qualities of staff is to involve young people in recruitment and assessment processes.
- The study raises questions about the usefulness of current qualifications, in particular the very limited attention paid to residential care within general social work training. A post-qualifying qualification that specifically addresses working in residential child care could be useful. Concern was also expressed regarding the over-reliance on

temporary bank staff to ensure that staffing levels were met, which is unsettling for the young people and does not encourage positive relationships.

- The staff team needs to include a range of professionals such as youth and community workers and those with skills in sports and leisure activities as well as residential social workers. Additionally, if not available in the staff team, there should be ready access to the skill mix capable of addressing the full range of complex needs presented by the young people in residential child care.
- Consideration should be given to greater use of outreach work, either using residential staff or teams with a mix of skills: this can give staff the time and space to undertake specific pieces of work with young people and their families.
- Staff need to be deployed at times that best match the needs presented by the residents. The research shows that disruptive or challenging behaviour tends to occur in the evening or late at night. This has implications for staffing rotas and raises questions about the role and deployment of waking night staff.
- Competent management within units is necessary for the maintenance of good order. This includes appropriate support to staff, clarity in generating and applying rules and procedures and building and maintaining strong teamwork.

Engaging with young people

The dominant theme running through this study is the fundamental importance of the relationship between staff and young people. This is seen in two interrelated ways: the manner in which staff work with individual young people and the group of young residents; and the extent to which young people are involved in or feel part of the home as a functioning unit.

Young people we encountered endorsed the findings from the research review in identifying skilled staff as those who know young people and can therefore anticipate difficult situations, are calm and consistent, can successfully de-escalate situations, know how to physically restrain a young person appropriately, listen to young people, take an interest in them, get involved in activities with them and refrain from playing power games or constantly engaging in verbal battles with them.

This message is not new. The implication for practice is to consider how this can be achieved: through the recruitment and selection process, through specific training and through greater use of the perspectives of young people.

Staff are likely to have positive relationships with young people where the unit as a whole develops a culture of young people's participation so that involving young people becomes part and parcel of the way in which the unit operates – for

example, in generating rules and procedures, in having a say about rewards and sanctions and in taking part in cooking and other aspects of house maintenance.

Creating the knowledge base

Although the residential care sector has been subject to a great deal of scrutiny in recent years there is still a shortage of rigorous research on the impact of interventions in residential care. This study highlighted several specific areas where more work is needed:

- Mapping the incidence of challenging and disruptive situations. Despite the best efforts of the practice survey team it was not possible to establish a reliable assessment of the level of challenging situations in residential care in Northern Ireland or elsewhere. Without this, discussion of the topic has to rely on impressions of levels of violence and other challenging situations. There is a need for a mechanism for recording these incidents that is simple but applied consistently.
- The research review found that there were few robust evaluations of interventions in residential care and that there is a clear gap in the knowledge base here. Given the widespread use of TCI within units in Northern Ireland it is crucial that a robust evaluation of the impact of this and other interventions is commissioned. This would allow for the identification of the most valuable aspects

of these interventions and their application, thus allowing for key elements to be further developed.

- There was a very positive response to this study from those working within residential care; they highlighted the enormous value to be gained from involvement in such a process and the stimulating nature of reflection on practice and shared learning across the sector. All opportunities should be taken to harness this receptive climate and use it to enhance the quality of children's residential care.

Conclusions

Serious incidents of violence are rare in residential child care; rather, there is a sense of low-level, persistent, non-compliant and defiant behaviour, which has the potential to escalate if not managed effectively. There is also great variation between homes in their ability to manage challenging situations and this was influenced primarily by the nature and stability of the group of residents and the quality of the staff team. In addition, some of the homes demonstrated high tolerance levels for challenging behaviour, made great efforts to engage and build relationships with young people and had an understanding of the contextual reasons for the young person presenting with challenging behaviour. Particularly noteworthy in all of this was the ability to focus on the needs of the young people both individually and as a group.

Many strategies felt to be effective for the management of challenging situations in residential child care were identified across provision in Northern Ireland. However, there are undoubtedly areas of practice that still need to be developed to enable staff to continue to improve and further develop this existing effective practice; of particular importance is that of building and maintaining relationships with and between young people. There are also issues related to the system such as the need for a greater range of accommodation options to support homes to keep to their Statements of Purpose and admissions policies. These factors are often beyond the control of the individual homes and are among the recommendations in the recent consultation document *Care Matters in Northern Ireland: A bridge to a better future* (DHSSPS, 2007). They need to be moved on urgently if we are serious about offering children who are in residential care a quality home and a more life-enhancing experience.

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