

Building Relationships with Young People: A Model for Practice

Cheryl McMullin

Ulster University, UK

CORRESPONDENCE TO

Cheryl McMullin

c.mcmullin@ulster.ac.uk

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Abstract

This article discusses the importance of social work practitioners building relationships with «Looked after» or care experienced young people as they are a particular group most likely to have had many professionals or social work intervention in their lives. It examines the opportunities and challenges of building relationships with young people in contemporary social work practice. A young person may have had a number of social work practitioners, Winter (2015) highlights that continuous changes in their social worker can become a barrier to building positive relationships. This article shares practice experience as well as drawing on relational pedagogy to underpin the arguments for developing relational approaches and by applying a four stage relationship based model (McMullin, 2017 cited in McColgan and McMullin, 2017). In my experience relationships with young people become incredibly important even if at times the social work intervention was not initially welcome. Winter (2015) suggests that children desire better relationships with their social workers. Children and young people need warm and authentic adults who might not have all the answers or resources but essentially care; this can only be achieved through relational work.

Keywords

Relationship – Social Work – Looked after young people – Child protection

Current Context: Challenging Times

Children and young people are important as they are the next generation and like other vulnerable groups are not fully valued or protected in society. The care and protec-

Erickson

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tion of children in particular has been highlighted in the media often which evidences poor practice with fatal consequences highlighted in serious case reviews for example, Peter Connelly (2008) and more recently Daniel Pelka (2012). Thompson & Thompson (2008) highlight that the media plays a significant part in how social work is perceived in society and simplifies complicated social work issues. This coupled with increased political and socio-economic issues compounds the problems faced by family and childcare social work. Key issues for consideration are themes such as poverty, substance misuse/addiction, criminality, mental and/or other health issues, education/unemployment, domestic abuse, sectarianism, racism and single parent families. If children have experienced or are experiencing some of these issues it will undoubtedly make relational work more challenging. Young people may find trusting adults more difficult and often misunderstand well-meaning social work relationships and good intentions or interventions.

Family and childcare social work is one of the most complex areas of work, Munro (2011) highlights that child protection work involves working with uncertainty. Paradoxically it can often be the place where many newly qualified social workers enter into their first employment because of vacancies due to traditionally high staff turnover. Family and child care can often lose experienced and skilled staff owing to the complexity of work and increased caseloads. Many organizations may employ short-term agency workers and contracts, this can have implications for relational work because the agency worker may not know how long they will be available and the permanency principle for «Looked after» children is compromised as a result.

McCarthy (2015) highlights the stress and pressure social workers feel under and that there is evidence to suggest it is not a long-term career choice anywhere between 8-13 years in research by Curtis, Moriarty & Netten (2009). When working with a vulnerable group like children in the care system and understanding their experience of abuse, practitioners themselves may also experience secondary trauma. Sometimes it is exceptionally difficult to share, listen or understand the lived experience of someone else's abuse if practitioners are not aware or well supported themselves and they may experience «compassion fatigue» McFadden, Campbell & Taylor (2014).

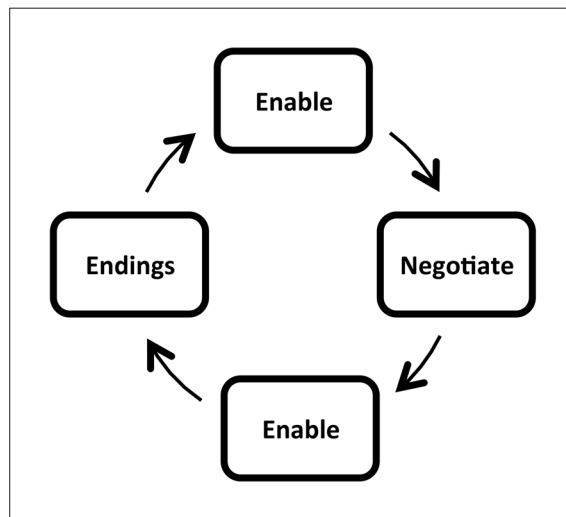
What is commonly referred to as «burn out» among professionals can be attributed to factors such as poor professional supervision and support, complexity of work, managing resistance and large caseloads. Research by Galek et al (2011) describes three elements which are, emotional exhaustion, feeling ineffective and becoming emotionally distant. Turbett (2014) also discusses social work «burn out» and practitioners feeling ineffective about their interventions and have doubts in relation to their ability and competence. If a practitioner is experiencing these feelings over a sustained period of time then this will greatly impact on the quality of relationships with the young people and their families.

To ensure that positive working relationships can be achieved with young people their needs to be some consideration of how we build these relationships and evaluate how they might be evolving.

A Relationship Based Model

In order to try and develop our ability to understand how relationships evolve this can be considered by focusing on four stages of development that is engaging, negotiating, enabling and endings when working with young people.

The 4 Stage Relationship Model



(McMullin, 2017, p.20, cited in McColgan & McMullin, 2017)

Stage 1: Engage

The first stage is the start of the relationship building process and engagement this can be done by using «soft skills» sharing ideas and thoughts building a rapport.

Stage 2: Negotiate

This stage is about negotiating and agreeing expectations, limits and boundaries to the relationship and contracting for example addressing consent and confidentiality. This involves skills such as explaining what you will be doing, how you will work with the service user, why you are involved in their lives.

Stage 3: Enable

It is about the process of enabling change, giving information choice and advice. There needs to be open communication, be realistic, positive and reflect on progress. Discuss interventions and resources- inhibitors and enabling factors. This stage is about building confidence and self-esteem encouraging and motivating.

Stage 4: Endings

It involves introducing endings and valuing the ending process as much as the start of the relationship building process. There needs to be reflection and evaluation on what has worked well, strengths for the future and coping strategies, sign posting to other services for further support.

Relationships are unique and should evolve organically rather than in a prescribed or linear way. This model does not aim to be prescriptive but gives some explanation as to how relationships might progress. This can be changeable as people can find themselves in different parts of the model at any given time and considers relationships are both complex and dynamic.

When applying this model with young people it is fundamental that practitioners try to engage in a warm and authentic way to establish trust and build a rapport- finding out about the young person and their interests. The negotiation stage is about being honest and explaining the boundaries of the working relationship and managing expectations. Enabling is concerned with developing and enhancing confidence for young people and giving them choice as well as building on their strengths. The importance of the ending stage is about disengaging in a positive way and reviewing and reflecting on what has been achieved. Working with children and young people is rewarding but it does require a practitioner to continually develop their repertoire of skills and be both creative and reflexive when it comes to building relationships with young people. This model focuses on the importance of building a relationship and the time spent on working alongside the young person.

Working with Children and Intrinsic Motivation

There needs to be some reflection and consideration on how difficult the work can be and necessitates the need for high quality supervision and a good supervisory relationship Wonaccott (2012). All practitioners have experienced childhood and often issues may resonate with them on a personal level. It is important that practitioners develop increased self-awareness and self-knowledge when working with children and young people and

consider their own motivations for working in this setting. Young people often say it is your «job» or «you get paid to do this» and it is the caring aspect of the profession that needs to be reinforced and the practitioner's intrinsic motivation for the work. Sometimes there is a dissonance between practitioner commitment to challenge, and to change the environmental barriers to effective engaging and enabling.

Engaging in the Spaces and Places

When working with children we need to consider the spaces and places where we carry out relational work and whether or not the environment is conducive to enhance this. When considering work with children and families, Ferguson (2014) highlights the challenges of the work environment and practitioners being aware of the places they carry out direct work. Practitioners should not overlook simple things that might have an impact on engaging for example smell, chaos, cleanliness or dogs/pets may have on the senses (Ferguson 2014). We need to be creative and think about where is the best place for the work and be honest about the impact of these experiences.

Even the practical arrangements need some consideration for example, timing of appointments, location and driving distances. Some work can take place in a police station, hospital, court or in custody and can sometimes be alien and intimidating. «Looked After» children in residential care often have not only residential social workers but community-based practitioners coming in and out of what is essentially their home and safe space.

When engaging with children we need to be aware of our «professional style» for example, the way we present ourselves and communicate. Koprowska (2010) highlights phatic communication as a more conversational style of talking which is nonthreatening, such as talking about football results or music festivals taking place. This type of nonthreatening communication is extremely effective in building relationships especially with children when trying to relate and see the world from their perspective. Damour (2016) advises that teenagers do not welcome direct questions or those that are pursuing a certain angle. Furthermore, teenagers find that if someone is rushed, not really listening or have good reasons for asking the questions it can be a source of annoyance. Practitioners need to consider factors like the place, suitability and timing for example, is the practitioner rushing to another appointment? Often the best work I engaged in with young people was in a more conversational and non-direct approach such as making a cup of tea, completing a piece of art work or on a car journey.

Professional and Personal Boundaries

In practice there are a number of ethical «grey areas» in relation to working with children. This is often not fully addressed or clear within different organizations for example giving birthday cards/presents, buying ice cream or attending an event. Ferguson (2014) discusses giving a child a hug and practitioners' reluctance due to fear of misunderstanding or a potential allegation. Bank's (2016) discusses ethics and posits practitioners should not just be guided by external governance they should act as active moral agents and challenge rules in relation to social justice and societal compassion. In order to develop authentic relationships with young people there needs to be greater emphasis on blending the personal and professional skills to sustain relationships for example, appropriate positive role modelling of our own experiences.

Practitioners must learn to use our own professional discretion, accountability and codes of Practice, and ethics to stand over the decisions we make in relation to these boundaries. In Northern Ireland these are highlighted within the Northern Ireland Standards of Conduct and Practice for Social Workers (2015). There are many social workers who go the «extra mile» at a personal cost to themselves and not the organization. Acts of kindness enable relationship building therefore they should become integrated and organizationally supported and accepted practice. The National Occupational Standards (2011) highlight the social work profession is about problem solving in human relationships. If the profession at its core is about relationships we need to refocus and revise our professional identity and reclaim the very essence of the profession.

Working with Children and Young People

When working with children from 0-18 years it encompasses huge amounts of change, and development emotionally and physically. This necessitates practitioners to be skilled and have knowledge of child development theory and methods of practice to underpin good practice. This helps with engaging, communicating and understanding the different stages of how children develop for example how we work with infants and teenagers would vary remarkably. When working with young people hormone changes and puberty can impact greatly on behaviour and engagement. Damour (2016) discusses that teenagers may distance themselves from their carers if they are considering risks and decisions that have greater consequences than before. Having knowledge of this behaviour in a social work or care context gives greater understanding of the expectations we have of young people and how we might build relationships.

If we want to engage and communicate effectively with young people we need to continue to pursue different methods for example phone, text or through the internet via email, face time or Skype. Young people may find that indirect or non-threatening ways

of communication are much easier than direct communication for relationship building. There is huge value in face- to- face work, however, practitioners in terms of building relationships need to blend their communication approach with young people. There may be some issues with using social media or other forms of communication, however, in my experience when building relationships any form of contact, such as, a text message is better than none at all. When applying the Relationship Model in the engagement stage phone calls and text messages can be very effective.

Relational Social Work: Children and Young People

There needs to be more emphasis on spending time with children with a view to building positive relationship with a child as an intervention in its self. Winter (2011) would concur that if children have high quality relationships with their social workers this can enhance their wellbeing and the interventions and services they receive.

There needs to be a blend of skills and knowledge used when trying to establish positive relationships with children using «soft skills» — age appropriate communication and blending this with information and advice. Children need consistency of care and in order to build trusting relationships. Social workers should be supported by having the resources and skills development to enable these. Social workers need to utilise reflective supervision and critically evaluate the effectiveness of their intervention and skills. There needs to be more skills training with input from young people and ensure there is qualitative feedback from services users to shape the services they receive.

Social work practitioners need to spend time nurturing relationships and these should be given greater emphasis and importance. Often we are trying to repair or establish other relationships in the lives of children and there is too little time spent building one with the child (Winter 2011). Alongside this practitioners should model and encourage the importance of social capital for «Looked After» children in terms of family, friendships and community. Daly's (2012) research in relation to care leavers highlighted that personal relationships rather than professional ones need to be established and informal social supports to enable successful transitions from care. Young people need to be encouraged in the value of building and sustaining relationships and giving them a voice in terms of who they identify with and can trust.

Practitioners need to listen to young people and encourage and model positive relationships for them. It can be a challenge trying to build a positive relationship with a young person, for example, when their parents/carers and the people closest to them have let them down or have difficult and conflicted relationships. When children have come into the care system they have received an incredibly powerful message about relationships that for whatever reasons their parent (s) are unable to care for them. This must be a painful message for children to make sense of or process coupled with trauma.

Practitioners need to reflect on this and consider their values, for example, empathy and understanding to really hear and listen to the service user's narrative. This will give us insight, knowledge and understanding which will inform our ability to build effective relationships with children and their families.

When building relationships with children it is important to engage with siblings, wider family members, for example, aunts, cousins, friends or other trusted professionals. Often young people may be reluctant to engage but if you can work with someone close to them and build trust through them this can be very useful. If a young person can see, that another child or adult trusts the social worker they maybe more likely to consider engaging in a relationship with them. If young people have had lots of contact with professionals and you engage with them after many others they could be «professionally fatigued». They have had so much involvement and interventions that they have no investment in the relationship and may engage on a very superficial level. To engage in a meaningful way it may be important to engage with that young person through play or another interest first to establish a rapport.

Practitioners when engaging in relationships need to be mindful that there should not be any additional pressure placed on the young person having to retell their narrative unless they want to. Some experiences are painful and often difficult for young people to process until much later on in life. This is why good information sharing of assessments and reports and multiagency working should minimise any potential stress on initial relationship building.

Practitioners should never underestimate our impact when working with children and young people. Practitioners can work with children for many years and become an important adult in their lives. This has been proved in research in relation to care experienced young people. In my experience it is not until an ending occurs that the impact may be fully realized this makes the ending phase of work incredibly important that the relationship is acknowledged and there is some way of marking both formally and informally.

Young People and Leaving Care

In Western society young people have become more increasingly dependent on their parents from the perspective of a prolonged phase of transition into adulthood. «The gap between young care leavers and peers with no previous care experiences appears to be widening» (Hojer & Sjoblom 2010:125) this has been evidenced within the current regional, national and international research (Hojer & Sjoblom, 2010; Dixon et al.,2006; Stein, 2008; Pinkerton, 2011; Daly, 2012, Ward, 2011, Winter 2015).

Young people may be ready to leave care and those professional and personal relationships that have been established as well as new ones may make up the support network. Some young people make the decision for themselves to withdraw from profes-

sional support or specifically social work support if they have been dissatisfied with the relationship or had poor care experiences. However often young people do not want to leave their placement once they reach 18 years old. They feel that they are being asked to leave their placement, even if the young people have been in their care placement and considered it as their home (Hojer & Sjoblom 2010:123).

Young people may have built extremely positive relationships with either foster or residential carers and because of their age the expectation is that they move on. Gaskell (2010) and Anghel & Beckett's (2007) research highlights issues with defining an age limit of 18 or 21 and having a «cut off point» that young people were forced to leave their placements. Unfortunately this is a poor message when reflecting on relational work that ultimately minimizes and under values relationships. There needs to be further consideration in the planning process for resources and tailoring packages that meet the needs of individual young adults.

Stein (2008) advised that «the journey to adulthood for many young care leavers is shorter, steeper and often more hazardous» (Stein 2008:1) to that of their peers. This makes the role of the practitioner critical in terms of having another consistent and reliable relationship to seek support and guidance. There needs to be more emphasis on professional carers and how is it formalised or recognised once young people leave care.

Significant Adults and Relationships

What has emerged from research is that a «significant adult» in a young care leavers life is important in terms of reducing potential risks and aid a successful transition. Young people need emotional and social support throughout the transition and beyond thus professional support is not time limited. Gaskell's research in (2010) identified that «Many Children in the care system have not experienced a care-giver that they can trust to contain their emotional distress» (Gaskell 2010:139).

Daly (2012) identifies social supports as being very important to young care leavers especially those who do not have family support when making the transition from care. Those personal relationships rather than professional ones need to be established and informal social supports are very important; this is mirrored in research by Gaskell (2010). However, often young people become isolated and vulnerable and perhaps have few friends or additional supports. Winter (2015) reinforces that one key relationship rather than a multiplicity of relationships can be important and not to underestimate or minimise the importance of the social work practitioner and young person relationship.

Conclusion

This article has introduced a theoretical model that can be applied when working with young people and can help enable practitioners to reflect and enhance their ability to build relationships. It has addressed some of the key issues that can impact on the work for both young people and practitioners. It has considered practitioners motivation for the work, supervision and support, the challenging nature of the work, the boundaries of the professional relationship and the limitations of resources. For young people it has considered the environment in which the work takes place, age appropriate work and creativity, significant adults, wider family and social networks as being key issues.

Working with young people is complex and requires a high level of skill from the practitioner. It is important that practitioners are well supported and have opportunities to reflect on their practice and interventions. There needs to be more focus on building relationships and practitioners and young people need to have resources, time and opportunities to enable the relationship building process.

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