Opportunities for change

Working with young people who display sexually harmful or concerning behaviour

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Introduction

Barnardo’s believes that work with children and young people who display behaviour that is sexually concerning or harmful is a primary means of child protection. The benefits of helping these children and young people change their behaviour are two-fold – other children and young people are protected from becoming victims of this behaviour and they themselves are protected from any harm or risk they may experience as a result of their actions.

What is sexually harmful or concerning behaviour?

There are a wide range of behaviours which can be identified as sexually harmful or concerning. The issue can also be viewed from a number of different perspectives, which makes it difficult to reach a definition. One useful suggested definition (1) is:

‘Young people [below the age of 18 years] who engage in any form of sexual activity with another individual, that they have powers over by virtue of age, emotional maturity, gender, physical strength, intellect and where the victim in this relationship has suffered a sexual exploitation and betrayal of trust.’

It is estimated that between 30 and 40 per cent of child sexual abuse perpetrators are aged under 18 (2). However Barnardo’s believes that using the term ‘child abuse’ or ‘child abuser’ when referring to these children and young people is inappropriate. Instead we encourage the use of the term ‘sexually harmful or concerning behaviour’ when referring to the actions of these young people. We feel this is more suitable as some children and young people engage in such behavour without the knowledge or maturity to realise that what they are doing is wrong. This is not to detract from the seriousness of the impact of their behaviour but recognition of their status as children and young people and the need to work with them in a way that is different from adults.

The issue is extremely difficult to deal with – not only for the victim and their parents and carers but for the young person displaying the behaviour and their family members. Many people cannot conceive that a child or young person would engage in such behaviour, while others find it difficult to recognise the behaviour as harmful and confuse this with normal sexual development and exploration. It is not always easy to tell the difference and a recent UK publication (2) has been launched to help parents and carers become more aware of the warning signs.

The Young People’s Therapeutic Project

The project works with young people aged 12 – 18 years who are referred because of their sexually concerning or harmful behaviour. The project not only aims to help young people change their behaviour; but also to develop healthy, non-abusive relationships. There are greater opportunities for change with young people than with adults because young people are still developing emotionally and physically and their patterns of behaviour may not be so fixed or entrenched.

This briefing paper is based upon an evaluation of the project’s work with 71 young people in Belfast and Derry between September 1998 and June 2001 (3). The work initiated by the Barnardo’s Project in Derry was continued by Foyle Health & Social Services Trust.

Profile of young people attending the project

Firstly it is important to stress that there is no ‘typical’ young person likely to be referred to the project. It is important not to stereotype young people who display sexually concerning or harmful behaviour as this can create barriers to identifying and working with them – thus increasing the risk of harm to others.

The types of behaviours displayed by young people referred to the project, although still serious, tended to be mainly of a touching or fondling nature. Actual penetration (anal, vaginal or digital) accounted for 11 out of the 71 cases in the evaluation. The victim was usually from outside of the family but in almost all cases was known to the young person.
The majority of young people attending the project are referred by social services, with a smaller number by the probation service. Most young people are unlikely to have been prosecuted for their behaviour, with probation orders the most likely outcome for those who have been prosecuted.

**Children in need**

Children in need can be broadly defined as a child or young person unlikely to achieve or maintain a reasonable standard of health or development without the provision of services to provide help and support (4). Young people referred to the project are very often children in need themselves. This is consistent with previous research (5) which also indicates that most young people displaying behaviour that is sexually concerning or harmful will also have considerable needs of their own. The young people involved in the evaluation were found to have varying levels of contact with social work agencies ranging from none to long standing involvement. However, many of the young people shared similar backgrounds and were in need of extra support, as illustrated below.

- More than half of the young people had suffered some form of parental disruption in their lives.
- Over a third were not living with their immediate family at the time of their referral.
- Almost a third had experienced some degree of violence within their family.
- 30.7 per cent of service users in Belfast and 15.8 per cent in Derry had been subject to confirmed physical, sexual abuse or neglect. There was also either suspected abuse or grounds for potential abuse among some of the other service users.
- Just under a quarter of the young people had some form of learning disability.

It is interesting that, given the levels of abuse and suspected abuse, most of the young people referred to the project were not on the Child Protection Register.

**Work methods**

A range of methods and interventions are used in working with the young people, their parents and carers. They include work with the individual for assessment and treatment; group work; work with the family and psychometric testing.

The project also provides training and a consultancy service to other professionals.

**Evidence of positive change**

Recent guidance from the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (6) highlights the importance of early intervention. It is important that intervention encourages the young person to take responsibility for their actions while responding to their individual needs.

The project outcomes show a number of very successful interventions. These outcomes were measured through questionnaires for each young person completed before and after treatment.

The project was particularly successful in working with young people to enhance their levels of empathy and remorse. Low self-esteem is a common characteristic of young people referred to the project and there were strong indicators of improved self-esteem after intervention. There were also significant improvements in terms of the individual’s internal processes – the justifications, perceptions and judgements used to rationalise their behaviour. The majority of young people moved from taking little or no responsibility for their actions towards accepting full or nearly total responsibility for their behaviour.

**Feedback**

**Young people**

Positive feedback from young people highlighted some of the benefits from the project, such as helping them feel empathy for others, increased willingness to talk and the ability to make decisions and take control of their future.

’The project helped me and my family through a very hard time in our lives. It prepared me for daily life again, to take control of my life and look towards the future.’

Others found being able to talk to staff and therapists extremely useful. One young person revealed that hearing other people express their feelings during group work made it possible for them to talk about things they may otherwise have kept hidden.

There were also significant improvements in the family life of the young people.

’I found it easier to talk to my parents. My family were involved, I needed to learn how to talk to them more.’

**Parents and carers**

A great deal of work with the young person can be achieved by working with their parents or carers and through gaining their support and understanding. Generally, project staff found the young person’s mother the most likely parent to offer support. However, there were also very positive results when fathers and male carers became involved.

This is a difficult issue for parents and carers to come to terms with and it takes time to fully understand what the project entails. One parent’s feedback illustrates this:

’At first I didn’t think he had done anything wrong, but I came to terms that he had sexually offended.’

Most parents and carers felt that they benefited from the project and felt better equipped to deal with the consequences of their child’s behaviour.
Professionals

Most feedback from the 24 professionals who responded to the project evaluation was positive. One respondent stated:

‘It's an important and valuable project that works with young people to challenge their behaviours but in a young people friendly fashion’.

Rates of repeated behaviour

It is hoped that the young people referred to the project will ultimately make a positive change to their behaviour and access the support they need to maintain these changes. It is currently only possible to measure this in the short-term, and unfortunately it is known that two of the service users repeated their behaviour while involved with the project. However, research (6) shows that an estimated recidivism rate for this population is 12 per cent, indicating that the project has achieved success in preventing young people repeating their sexually concerning or harmful behaviour.

It would be important to monitor this on a longer-term basis to determine the overall success of the work. However, this will be difficult due to the voluntary nature of future contact with the service.

Cost benefit

The project was funded from 1998 to 2001 by a partnership of four agencies: Barnardo’s, Eastern Health & Social Services Board, Western Health & Social Services Board and the Department of Health, Social Services & Public Safety. In December 2001 the Foyle Trust took over the management of the service in Derry.

Between October 1998 and June 2001 the project completed work with 71 young people in Belfast and Derry. The total cost of the pilot project can be calculated as £2,394.00 per person with each young person attending the project for an average of 12 months. These figures contrast with the costs for residential services or secure accommodation, where total costs for similar work carried out by residential services are between £2,500 – £3,500 per person per week*.

*Figures based on similar UK services including costs provided for The Marlowe Child & Family Service, Gloucester; Woodlands Family Development Centre, Wrexham; PIC Children’s Specialist Services, Merseyside; and Bryn Melyn, Gwynedd.

Key issues

- During their time at the Young People’s Therapeutic Project the vast majority of young people were not thought to have repeated their behaviour.
- The support of the young person’s family is vital to the success of the work of the project.
- It is important to apply principles that remain child-centred and the young people should be responded to in a way that ensures that their individual needs are met.
- There are positive outcomes of working with these young people at this stage of their development.
- There is a need to develop practice in working with young people who have displayed or are displaying sexually harmful behaviour. It is also important to have access to specialist services to assess his or her level of ability to ensure they receive an appropriate level of service.

The Rights of the Child

Barnardo’s Young People’s Therapeutic Project works in accordance with the United Nations Convention on The Rights of the Child.

Article 40 States Parties recognise the right of every child alleged as, accused of, or recognised as having infringed the penal law to be treated in a manner consistent with the promotion of the child’s sense of dignity and worth, which reinforces the child’s respect for the human rights and fundamental freedoms of others and which takes into account the child’s age and the desirability of promoting the child’s re-integration and the child’s assuming a constructive role in society.

States Parties shall seek to promote the establishment of laws, procedures, authorities and institutions specifically applicable to children alleged as, accused of, or recognised as having infringed the penal law.

A variety of dispositions, such as care, guidance and supervision orders; counselling; probation; foster care; education and vocational training programmes and other alternatives to institutional care shall be available to ensure that children are dealt with in a manner appropriate to their well-being and proportionate both to their circumstances and the offence.
Policy & practice recommendations

There is a need for specific services for young people displaying sexually concerning or harmful behaviour and our practice highlights positive outcomes from engaging with young people at this stage in their development.

There is also a need for increased resources to develop the work and increase the number of young people entitled to therapeutic intervention and to ensure consistency in practice. Currently, not all young people displaying sexually harmful or concerning behaviour are referred to a service.

Where there is a risk to other children or young people (for example in the family home or if the young person is already living in residential care) alternative forms of accommodation need to be made available. For example, specialist foster care placements which would provide a supportive environment while reducing the risk to others.

The project evaluation showed that while the project helped improve social functioning among users, a number of young people remained socially isolated. Further interventions and ways of combating social isolation are needed to help these young people become more integrated into society.

Services in contact with young people displaying behaviour that is sexually harmful or concerning must keep detailed records and evaluate their work to increase the knowledge and evidence base to inform more effective treatment and preventative work.

As the children and young people referred to the project are likely themselves to be children in need, this work needs to be part of an overall child protection strategy.

Principles for practice

Barnardo’s work in this area is underpinned by a set of principles for practice:

- We will only accept referrals on children, young people and their families who have been informed about the referral to the service.
- Before starting work we will try to ensure the safety of the child or young person or others who may be at risk.
- We will be honest with children, young people and their families about our agency’s child protection responsibilities.
- We will create an environment in which children can feel safe.
- We will seek to create a climate for change.
- It is essential that the work recognises the developmental state and cognitive ability of the child or young person.
- Children and young people will be encouraged to be active participants rather than passive recipients – ‘doing with’ rather than ‘doing to’.
- We will take an holistic approach to the work, taking account of children’s and young people’s needs.
- We will ensure the confidentiality of the children and young people we work with, as long as it is safe to do so.
- The diversity of the children and young people will be respected and reflected in our practice.
- We will seek to actively involve the child or young person’s family.
- We will promote good communication within the child and young persons networks.
- Our services should improve the current situation.
- We should learn from what we do, through evaluation and research.
References


Who can help?
Stop it Now! 0808 1000 900

Free helpline for anyone who suspects that someone is sexually abusing a child, or for anyone worried about their own thoughts or behaviour towards children.

ChildLine 0800 1111

If you are a child or young person and would like advice, support or someone to talk to please call the ChildLine freephone helpline.

For further information about this project please contact:

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