

Barnardo's Refer 2 Us 'Safe and Happy' consultation report 2006



Barnardo's
Northern Ireland

GIVING CHILDREN BACK THEIR FUTURE

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Refer 2 Us is a group of 10 young people aged 15-21 with a range of life experiences who had all been involved with a Barnardo's service at some point. From the beginning, their wish was to be the voice of other children and young people using Barnardo's services. They agreed a programme of activities including team building, anti-bullying awareness, sexual health, and life skills. They met monthly and for a number of residential weekends. Throughout this time they were also developing their thinking about how they could be the 'voice of other children and young people'. They talked about wanting to *'hear it first hand from children and young people; understand different experiences; be trained to do this in a non-threatening way; make a difference for others; help Barnardo's make better decisions; be positive role models and give a message to other children and young people that their views are important'*.

What do children and young people in Northern Ireland need to feel safe and happy?

Most adults probably believe they already know the answer to this question and, in fact, this is how most decisions which impact on the lives of children and young people are made – by adults and based on assumptions. But the Barnardo's Refer 2 Us group set out to discover the answer themselves by consulting with almost 150 children and young people who use Barnardo's Services. The Refer 2 Us group was born out of Barnardo's Northern Ireland Participation Strategy - in 2003 Barnardo's NI focussed deliberately on developing its strategy to promote and support the participation of children and young people within the organisation. One aspect of this strategy involved working directly with a group of young people to help us develop our practice in relation to participation.

Refer 2 Us decided that their next step should be to go out and consult others on things that were important to them, and that adults should understand these things better from a child or young person's perspective. A training programme was put in place which covered such topics as safeguarding, designing questionnaires, interview skills and how to analyse the findings. They decided that the best starting point was to find out from children and young people what makes them feel safe and happy: *'we think every child and young person should have the right to be safe and happy and not be afraid of anything, and we wanted to find out the sort of thing they were afraid of and how safe and happy they felt in different environments'*.

They thought this would be a good starting point and would provide lots of information which could be used and built on in different ways. Once they agreed on the main question they then agreed the aspects of life that they would focus on, for example, family, friends and community.

The consultation took place over a five week period in autumn 2005. Almost 150 children and young people were consulted across Northern Ireland from Bushmills to Belfast, from Newry to Magherafelt. There was a wide range of life experiences, abilities and ages – from three to early twenties. In order to ensure that everyone had the best chance of participating in the consultation, a range of methodologies were used. The main method was focus groups but there were also one-to-one interviews and a small number of questionnaires. Because of the wide mix in age, ability and experience not everyone answered all questions.

Once the consultation was complete, work for the next few months focussed on analysing and making sense of all the information that had been gathered. In doing this it became clear that all the information could be matched with Barnardo's Building Blocks. These are emotional, physical and mental health; protection from harm; positive family life; community; education and a stake in society. The shared vision outlined in the NI Children's Strategy that 'all children and young people living in Northern Ireland will thrive and look forward with confidence to the future' will be measured against similar outcomes which show that children are: healthy; enjoying, learning and achieving; living in safety and with stability; experiencing economic and environmental well-being; contributing positively to community and society and living in a society which respects their rights.

“ We need friends to turn to – someone who doesn’t judge you and who will listen to you. ”

(Young mum, 17 years)



I. Emotional, physical and mental health

All of the children and young people interviewed felt they would turn to family and friends for help and support. They described them using words like: *loving; caring; someone I can talk to; reliable; understanding; helpful; good support and non-judgemental.*

'We need friends to turn to – someone who doesn't judge you and who will listen to you', (Young mum, 17 years).

The majority of children and young people interviewed said they had friends, but many of the disabled children and young people commented on feeling a sense of isolation. Most felt they had no or few friends. This was also true of the young mothers who were interviewed - they felt extremely isolated once they had given birth to their child. This was mainly due to their friends now having different interests and commitments than them.

Almost all the disabled children and young people interviewed felt they had suffered discrimination at some stage and had been bullied at some time in their lives. One young woman expressed how she is bullied and her difficulty in making friends: *'a lot of people can't accept my disability so I get picked on a lot and find it hard to make friends',* (Young person from Dr B's Kitchen).

Describing times when they didn't feel safe with their friends, children and young people said: *when they reject you; whenever I drink with them because they get violent and be a risk to me and others; when they do silly things and try to get you to do it and then you might get in trouble, too.*

For those disabled children and young people needing support in their independence, they felt it was important for the person working with them to let them know what was going on so that they could feel safe. For example, if someone needs the use of a hoist to get in and out of bed, then their carer should tell them when it's about to move. Another young woman said that *'parents and professionals often make choices based on what's convenient for them, for example, a parent will agree a time for the carer to come and put the child or young person to bed but it will be a time that suits the parent or carer and not the child or young person so they could be in bed every night at tea time,'* (Young disabled woman, 21 years).

“ 100% of the children and young people interviewed about being bullied said it had happened to them at some time in their lives – this mostly took place at school. ”



2. Protection from harm

When children and young people were asked if they thought it is more or less safe for children in today's society than it was ten years ago there was a mixed response. Many felt that it was safer now since the ceasefires with fewer shootings and no bombs. Many also felt, however, that it was much more dangerous. They talked about the availability of drugs, alcohol-fuelled violence, the number of knives being carried 'by everyone', the high number of paedophiles, bullying and exploitation on the internet and using mobile phones and the number of 'hoods' that are around. There was no obvious rural/urban split with young people in rural areas expressing as much fear as those who lived in bigger towns and cities.

A significant number of primary school aged children did not feel safe at school and felt teachers were either not interested or didn't care about them: *some kids get bullied; sometimes they [teachers] don't believe what I say; [teachers] give you hassle all the time; I have dreams about men bombing the school.* However, most children and young people talked about feeling safe in school. In the cases where children felt they could trust and talk to teachers, safety was less of an issue – *if someone is bullying someone then the teacher will talk to them; some of the teachers talk about you but some you can trust; she helps me to learn and keep safe and do letters.*

The majority of young people consulted with do not feel safe within their own communities. However, most said that they felt safer when they were with family members and friends. One of the reasons identified by children and young people for not feeling safe in their communities was a lack of transport and insufficient public lighting. Those consulted believed females were more likely to suffer a sexual attack and males were more likely to suffer a violent attack.

Disabled young people also described feeling vulnerable when out socialising: *'sometimes if you're relying on [friends] it can be scary, like if we're all out for the night. I need to know I'll get home safe and they'll be able to look out for me'* and *'they need to be able to lift me or get help if I fall out of my wheelchair'*.

Many children and young people didn't know what politicians do but, of those who did, 100% felt that politicians could do nothing to make them feel safe in Northern Ireland.

The majority of the children and young people felt that the police did not make them feel safer:

50% of the children and young people who were asked if Barnardos could do anything more to help them feel safer believed that they were doing enough while the other 50% felt that Barnardos could/should be doing more.

The majority of children and young people believed that money didn't make any difference to how safe they felt but that it makes a difference when you are able to get a taxi or bus home from somewhere and when you have credit in your phone so you can contact someone in an emergency. *'Money can't buy you safety but can buy you safety locks but they can still be broken'*, (Young mum).

“ When I get hugs from Mum and Dad. ”



“ If I get cut my Mum will put a plaster on. ”

(9 years)

3. Positive family life

Children and young people described living in a range of family types. These included living with one parent, two parents, siblings, grandparents, foster carers, their own children and in residential care. Pets were also frequently included in the list of who they called family.

It was particularly apparent with pre-school and primary school children how important family is to their sense of happiness. When asked what makes them feel happy pre-school children said: *'My mum makes me happy; when I get hugs from mummy and daddy'*. Older children said *'I feel safest with my Mum and Dad 'cos they will protect me'*, (Boy, 11 years) and *'If I get cut my Mum will put a plaster on'*, (9 years).

Not surprisingly, not all the comments about families were positive. Words like *'bad; frightened; dysfunctional; like a yoyo – up and down, good and bad; not reliable; and angry'* were used when asked what they thought of their family. Quite a lot of the children and young people interviewed said that they were bullied by another family member – usually a brother or sister.

“ 60% of children and young people do NOT feel safe in their own communities. ”



4. Community

60% of children and young people interviewed do not feel safe in their own communities. Depending on where the children and young people lived, some felt safe with paramilitaries and some didn't. Most of the younger children didn't say much about the presence of paramilitaries but as the age group increased so did the level of awareness. They described paramilitaries as 'wannabees' and 'hoods'.

They listed paramilitary activity as including: *kneecapping; beatings; robbers; protection money schemes; drug dealers; threats; prostitution; being kicked out of my house; graffiti and rioting*. Many could cite first hand experience of the impact of paramilitary activity. Some young people said that the presence of paramilitaries provided some sense of safety in their community.

The majority of disabled children and young people interviewed felt they had no access to public transport and other facilities within their communities.

One young man said *'I don't feel safe because of who I am and I know that people can be racist'*.

“ I don't feel safe because of who I am and I know that people can be racist. ”



5. Education

Most children and young people felt safe in schools and with teachers. However, a significant number of primary school aged children did not feel safe at school. In the cases where children felt they could trust and talk to teachers, safety was less of an issue.

A lot of the children and young people felt that if they had good teachers, that they trust their attendance and performance would be much greater. Also, if they have friends at school they are more likely to attend. One young woman said *'if the teachers cared more. I would go more'*.

One of the main messages from primary school age group was the importance of having after-school groups. In these groups they felt they received the support and help to do homework that they wouldn't necessarily get at home. It was also an important source of friendship.

A key message from the pre-school children was the importance of play and toys in the happiness of this age group.

The disabled children and young people interviewed said that school was mainly where their experiences of bullying took place.

The importance of assistive technology in communication for both educational purposes and emotional well being was highlighted for disabled children and young people. However, those who have access to this technology are in the minority.

“ If you are heard then you can change things. ”



6. Stake in society

This was understood by most young people as having a say in the things which impact on their life and, when this happens, they feel more valued, more interested and more likely to follow things through: *'if I make the decision then I'm more likely to stick with it'*. All those interviewed said that they should have a say in the things which affect their lives: *'when adults/social workers/parents involve me when making a decision about me, it makes me feel valued, confident and good about myself'*, (Young woman, 17 years). *'If you are heard then you can change things'*, (Young man, 16 years). This ability to make important decisions was seen as something which made a difference to where young people saw themselves in society and how they were seen by others, particularly by powerful adults.

However, 74% of those consulted believed that, in general, children and young people are not trusted to make important decisions. Many examples of this were given: *'cos social workers say I'm too young to make my own decisions'*, (9 year old) and *'I didn't want to do my 11+ but I had to'*, (11 year old). This was particularly true for disabled young people: *'Sometimes adults don't want to take risks or share power. They think they know best so they make all the decisions'*, (Disabled young woman, 21 years). Similarly, most of the young mums who were consulted felt that if they went anywhere with their own child and their mum (for support) a doctor or other professional would most likely address the mother of the young woman instead of the young woman herself – even though the visit was about her child.

Community SAFE?
 “60% of children and young people do NOT feel safe within their own communities.”
 Barnardo's Northern Ireland

Bullying SAFE?
 “100% of the disabled children and young people interviewed about being bullied said it had happened to them at some time in their lives - this mostly took place at school.”
 Barnardo's Northern Ireland

Racism SAFE?
 “I don't feel safe because of who I am and I know that people can be racist.”
 (Young man, aged 18 years)
 Barnardo's Northern Ireland

Friendship HAPPY
 “We need friends to turn to - someone who doesn't judge you and someone who will listen!”
 (Young Man, aged 17 years)
 Barnardo's Northern Ireland

Being heard HAPPY
 “If you are heard then you can change things.”
 Barnardo's Northern Ireland

Family HAPPY
 “When I get hugs from my Mum and Dad.”
 Barnardo's Northern Ireland

What next?

We have a responsibility to develop processes by which the perspective and participation of children and young people become embedded as a normal and regular part of the way Barnardo's works. The influence of their perspective and participation should be felt in the design and provision of services, the design and implementation of influencing activities and in decision-making processes. This is the challenge we face in developing and implementing the Participation Strategy in a genuine way.

'I'd like the information to go everywhere to let people find out what young people feel. Doing this consultation I thought was brilliant cos we got to find out the views of all different people and how they feel. I feel different having done the consultation 'cos I know now more about young people and children, their backgrounds and how they feel about life as well', (Refer 2 Us member aged 16).

Now that the consultation has been completed, the important messages will be shared with a wide range of people:

- A set of six posters has been designed by Refer 2 Us. These will be used to let children and young people know what they found out from them about what makes them feel safe and happy. The posters will go to every Barnardo's NI service and other places where young people meet.
- Every service will get a copy of this report and will be asked to consider the messages within it. They will be expected to use this information when planning and reviewing their work and to use this as the basis for consulting children and young people about other important issues.
- Refer 2 Us will meet with the Barnardo's NI Children's Services Management Team and the NI Committee to make sure they understand the messages and take them on board when making decisions about planning and resources.

'I think what surprised me most is the fact that when we went in and asked the children and young people the questions they were excited, they were willing to give you the answers and weren't holding anything back and I think more adults should give children more opportunity to make decisions and give their opinion', (Refer 2 Us member, aged 21).

Acknowledgements:

Barnardo's NI appreciates all the vision, enthusiasm, hard work and commitment shown by Refer 2 Us over this year long project. The Youth Achievement Award (at Platinum Level) is a great recognition of their contribution to the work of Barnardo's.

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