

Young people in care: How lockdown provides a haven of security and belonging

Claire Cameron

Abstract

Amidst all the gloom and concerns about what effect the emergency lockdown measures associated with COVID-19 are having on children, there is a small group of young people finding positive benefits. Staff at one Scottish provider of residential services for children and young people who have complex needs, say young people are less distressed than before lockdown and many seem happier than they were before the measures were implemented. Daily life is less pressured. Staff are happier too. Lockdown is proving to be a catalyst for changes in line with the principles of Social Pedagogy which promotes the value of meaningful relationships that offer emotional and practical support.

Keywords

COVID-19, education, looked after children, care experience, social pedagogy

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Amidst all the gloom and concerns about what effect the lockdown is having on children, there is a small group of young people finding positive benefits.

Children in foster care were thriving under lockdown, the Association of Directors of Children's Services in England told the House of Commons education select committee. In residential care homes, where about 10 percent of young people looked after by local authorities live, the various restrictions within the four nations of the UK have created opportunities for them to take up new skills, get fit and get along better with those around them.

Staff at Care Visions, Scotland's largest independent provider of residential services for children and young people who have complex needs, say young people are less distressed than before lockdown, and fewer are running away. Danny Henderson, one of Care Visions' managers, says that many young people seem happier than they were before the measures were implemented. Daily life is less pressured. Moreover, staff are happier too. They are focused on empathic caring in the here and now, creating spaces and experiences for and with children 'rather than working to outcome-driven plans with multi-agency involvement'.

For Care Visions, this is raising 'questions about what is of value to our young people and our work more generally...' There is an opportunity here to rethink residential care for young people in line with IOE (UCL Institute of Education) research findings.

Our 2006 comprehensive study of residential care in Denmark, England and Germany found that homes in England were more crowded, with more staff per young person, and the staff were more focused on discursive or 'discussing/talking' approaches to emotional support and less on empathic or 'listening' approaches (Petrie, Boddy, Cameron, Wigfall, and Simon, 2006).

The children's homes in Denmark and Germany had more creative and practical activities. Denmark is particularly interesting for its focus on 'cosiness' or a dedicated time in the day for getting together and sharing food and drink. This creates a feeling of domesticity and being at ease in one's surroundings.

Our study informed the then UK government's children's workforce strategy for looked after children in England and created an interest in the Social Pedagogy approach used in Germany and Denmark.

[Social Pedagogy](#) is a long-standing philosophical approach in continental Europe that we have broadly translated as 'education in its broadest sense'. It has many dimensions but in essence promotes the value of meaningful relationships that offer emotional and practical support. It uses reflection techniques to challenge assumptions and help disadvantaged young people create new goals, working at both the group and the individual level. Social pedagogy focuses on making everyday life as rich and full of opportunity as possible, often using creative expression and practical skill building as well as domestic routines.

At Nether Johnstone House, which provides specialist residential childcare services to children and young people aged eight to 21 years, lockdown is proving to be a catalyst for changes in line with social pedagogy. Staffing patterns have changed so that teams of staff are on shift for two or more days at a time, meaning there are fewer changes of staff. There are no visiting professionals, but young people contact their social workers by text or phone, which Elaine Hamilton, service manager, says has turned out to be a more 'natural and relaxed' way to communicate. She says, 'less rush and hurry means folk have time just to be present'. Young people know who to expect to be with, improving reliability and consistency. They 'feel safe and open to new opportunities'. Not going out means there is more time for board games, cooking and archery in the garden.

Going out, but for exercise only, led to one young person, previously disinterested in fitness, creating cycling goals for himself, that were then matched by a fellow resident. He reflected that before lockdown, when he had been able to go anywhere, he had done nothing, whereas now he knew he 'was not going back to live like that'.



Staff and residents have learned new organisational skills. Limited to shopping just three times a week, and only on a solo basis, led to menu planning in advance, and each young person writing their personal Covid-19 'survival list' to get through the next 48 hours. Elaine reports this change in itself has been a major success in achieving a: 'more natural way to shop with kids. They are learning to consider their needs in advance'.

Despite deep concern at the beginning of lockdown that it might reawaken trauma or prove to be unmanageable for young people who had previously lived in secure settings, there has been no rise in incidents where staff have had to physically restrain residents. According to Elaine, 'young people have really embraced and benefited from the relationships they had already established with the team, helping them to feel safe and listened to throughout'. There have, however, been some frustrations and difficulties, particularly for staff going between their own families and the children's home. Elaine asked two young women for advice about living with lockdown, given they had been through it in secure care settings. One said she felt safe in secure, and the metaphor of 'bubble wrap' summed up the feeling that the home under lockdown is a haven, for now, and while it feels constraining at times, they know it is not forever.



So the challenge now, as lockdown eases, is to constructively evaluate the conditions that support children in residential and foster care. It might mean preserving the sense of continuity, familiarity and belonging to a particular place, with a particular group of people, that lockdown has engendered. It might also mean making residential care an educational, or social pedagogic, experience with, perhaps, long term benefits for highly disadvantaged children.



Reference

Petrie, P., Boddy, J., Cameron, C., Wigfall, V., & Simon, A. (2006). Working with children in care: European perspectives. Maidenhead: Open University Press.

About the author

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Credits

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