

It's not just about the adults!

Judy Furnivall

Abstract

This article discusses how important it is for children in residential care to develop the ability to navigate relationships with each other. The current focus on the importance of relationships between adults and children can become distorted so that relationships that may exist between young people and their peers may not be given the respect or importance that they deserve. This is often explained through a misuse of attachment or trauma theory by suggesting that young people are not emotionally 'ready' to cope with peer relationships.

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Cast your mind back to your own childhood and adolescence. Most of you, I am sure, will remember important relationships with adults in your own family, school or community that made you feel safe, loved and cared about and perhaps inspired and stimulated and possibly you are still friends with some of them.

I very much doubt, however, if they are the only important relationships that you remember: Brothers and sisters; friends and enemies; being with other children are an essential part of normal childhoods. Joy, excitement, pain and delinquency — all often hidden from the adult world — characterise these relationships.

They provide the space where we learn to cope with competition and disappointment, the freedom to experiment with different identities and the people with whom we can not only have unsupervised fun but also share our anxieties and hopes free from adult judgement. This is, in fact, how we learn about ourselves in a social world.

Let's be honest though — if the adults in our lives had known at the time what we had got up to in this social sphere there are times they would probably have been very anxious!

Pushing the boundaries

Children and adolescents can be cruel to each other, they may encourage each other to get up to mischief or even egg each other on to take dangerous risks. It is, however, this very pushing at the boundaries that allows children and young

people to work out how to manage themselves in difficult situations and survive as they traverse the hazardous route from dependent childhood to independent adulthood.

It is also true, despite parental beliefs, that there is no easy split into 'good' and 'bad' crowds. The same young people who are involved in dangerous or delinquent behaviours together may be the very individuals who provide each other with the most sensitive support in times of distress and strongest encouragement to succeed in life.

The importance of sibling relationships in residential care

For children in residential care this natural social experience is often absent or severely curtailed. Separation from their brothers and sisters is a common experience, even though we know the level of distress and impact this can have.

Within many residential settings, the relationships between children are often seen as troublesome — a problem to be overcome rather than a resource to be nurtured and cherished.

While occasionally there are concerns about the potential harm that children may cause each other, often it is practicalities that cause and maintain the separation of children experiencing care. Yet we know that our siblings can be the people with whom we have the longest relationships in our lives, the people we turn to for all sorts of practical and emotional support.

Even when we believe that there may be a current danger in a particular sibling relationship we should have the courage and determination to face this and help children find a safe way to regain a positive connection. For most young people, however, it is not concern about risk so much as our failure to prioritise and resource these important connections that cause such painful breaches in relationship. How would you feel if this was happening to your children, or children you know?

A misuse of attachment or trauma theory

The current (and important) focus on the importance of relationships between adults and children can become distorted so that relationships that may exist between young people and their peers may not be given the respect or importance they deserve.

This is often explained through a misuse of attachment or trauma theory by suggesting that young people are not emotionally 'ready' to cope with peer relationships. Anyone who has watched a baby's delight and joy when playing with a slightly older brother or sister knows that we come into the world ready for social connection with people who are not necessarily attachment figures. Our young people have the same need and yearning for reciprocal relationships where they give and take, have fun and explore.

Learning how to manage in a protected way

Just as happens in a family setting, sometimes these relationships will become fraught and explosive in a residential setting. But, just as in a family, a

residential setting provides a fantastic space where it is possible to learn in a protected way how to manage such fallouts safely and repair relationships.

These are key skills that children transfer to school and community connections.

Residential care is by definition a group experience but we are in danger of denying the therapeutic potential of the group of young people and instead focus on the dangers young people present to each other. Whether we like it or not, children in residential settings will have important relationships with each other.

If we do not actively encourage positive relationships and a culture where young people feel responsible for each other we run the risk of fostering exactly the kind of damaging, delinquent sub-culture we fear. When teams and workers show the courage to question the systems and procedures that push them to work in this destructive way, young people flourish and this positive culture can make residential settings less stressful places in which to work. The friendships and connections that can develop in residential care should be celebrated not feared!

The impact of ruptured relationships

I am not denying that some young people can present a very real threat to the wellbeing and safety of others, but we behave as if this is the default position rather than a rarity. If we listen to adult care leavers they describe the importance of the relationships they had with other children whose lives they shared in care. Often those relationships continue into adulthood and underpin a valuable network where care experienced people can be sure of support and understanding from others who shared their childhood.

Where these relationships have been ruptured by placement moves, the impact on children of such losses can be devastating, yet little thought is invested in considering ways to maintain and support these important connections.

This is not good enough and we have a responsibility to acknowledge, respect and support the enduring nature of these relationships. Social isolation is one of the hardest issues facing care leavers and it is unsurprising that they turn to the people they grew up with for emotional connection. If we have always emphasised the negative rather than the positive in these relationships then we should not be surprised that often these relationships become destructive and damaging when adult control is removed.

Resilience through friendship

We now understand that what is harmed through relationship can best be healed through relationship. The persistent error we make is to assume that this only happens for children in their relationships with adults.

Strength and resilience is developed through friendships and through being responsible for others. Let us unleash the therapeutic power of young people's relationships with each other, allow them the joy and risks of normal childhood and be ready to support them through their mistakes.

Resources

A new multi-agency partnership 'Stand Up For Siblings' champions the improvement of contact between siblings in the care system.

About the author

Judy Furnivall is a consultant at CELCIS. She provides training and consultancy in key areas including attachment, trauma and resilience, aiming to increase reflective capacity, emotional strength and understanding amongst the adults who care for looked after children. Here she discusses how important it is for children in residential care to develop the ability to navigate relationships with each other.

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