Book Review

Pallett, C., Blackeby, K., Bengo, C., Yule, W., Weissman, R., Scott, S. &Fursland, E. (2015). *Managing difficult behaviour: How to improve relationships.* London: CoramBAAF. 128pp. ISBN: 978 1 910039 366, £14.95

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Managing difficult behaviour, or as it is sometimes referred 'challenging behaviour' is the subject of many books, articles and training courses within various fields including education, residential child care, foster care, mental health, learning disabilities and elderly care. Working with trauma-experienced and relationally resistant youth can be very challenging. Their early childhood experiences of abuse, neglect and often trauma means that they have very complex needs and difficulty regulating their emotions, which are often expressed through their behaviour (Cairns, 2016). Managing challenging behaviour, or pain-based behaviour (Anglin, 2003) (which I feel is a more helpful and informed term), can be very difficult and is often the cause of multiple placement breakdowns both within residential child care and foster care. Supporting carers to develop the necessary skills to confidently and competently respond to young people in an emotionally attuned way is vital to improving stability of placements and long-term outcomes (Fahlberg, 2012).

Having said this I am always sceptical when resources and tool kits with their tips and techniques are pitched as the holy grail of behaviour management. Sold as transformational or revolutionary strategies, they are, more often than not in my experience, variants of what has come before. They usually have a focus on behaviour modification and rarely recognise the uniqueness of the young person, their individual circumstances or the therapeutic value of relationships.

When I received this booklet for review, although sceptical, I was encouraged by the opening title which I feel is noteworthy. *Managing Difficult Behaviour: How to Improve Relationships* (Pallett et al, 2015) suggested to me that the authors recognised and possibly understood the fundamental connection between relationships and behaviour. Meaningful, long-term changes in behaviour are best facilitated through access to emotionally attuned and responsive care-givers

who have the skills to assess and respond to the unmet needs of the young person – needs which I believe underpin all behaviour (Kohlstaedt, 2010).

This booklet evolved from a training programme designed to support foster carers. It is a relatively accessible, practice-focused guide which seeks to develop the skills of foster carers by increasing their understanding of what underpins behaviour. The impact of early childhood experiences on behaviour is also considered and practical strategies are explored which seek to address not only the young person's behaviour but to nurture reflective, self-aware and resilient care givers – see chapter 2 and chapter 13.

Each chapter outlines a different behaviour support strategy for carers to use. The strategies identified are supported by various theoretical perspectives and the reader is encouraged through the use of exploratory exercises to consider how they might utilise the strategies and to help develop relevant skills. Within the booklet there are a number of sections which have real value for the reader, especially chapter 2 on developing mindfulness. The two chapters that stood out for me, however, were chapter 1 and chapter 6.

Chapter 1 offers a very comprehensive and informed understanding of why children and young people behave the way they do. It draws on theoretical perspectives of attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969), neurodevelopmental theory (Perry, 2006) and social learning theory (Bandura, 1977) to consider the impact of early childhood trauma, abuse and neglect on the developing child. Whilst these may be complex theories for some to grasp, the language and terminology is accessible and the use of illustrative examples is also helpful. Having an understanding of why a young person may be behaving in a particular way encourages empathetic responses that seek to identify and address unmet need. It allows the care giver to frame behaviour as 'this young person is having [a] hard time' rather than 'this young person is giving me a hard time' (Emond, Steckley and Roesch-Marsh, 2016). Perspective and interpretation of the meaning which we attribute to behaviour is emphasised as key to being able to respond in a helpful way. Recognising and reframing our negative thoughts and interpretations is explored in chapter 2, which focuses on mindfulness and provides some excellent exercises to support carers to identify the relationship between negative thoughts, stress levels and unhelpful responses.

Chapter 6 focuses on the importance of communication and emphasises the needs to listen to and talk to your child as a means of developing your relationship and as a strategy for helping them to develop language to express emotions in a more socially acceptable and less traumatic way. The ability to manage difficult emotions is central to building and maintaining strong, positive relationship, developing social skills, improving long-term mental health and delivering positive outcomes in education (Daniel, Wassell and Gilligan, 2010). For many care-experienced young people, their early childhood experiences have not provided a strong foundation for emotional competence. This booklet

successfully outlines how good communication can nurture healthy relationships and provide emotionally containing experiences for young people by demonstrating to them that emotions can be controlled and conveyed effectively through verbal expression rather than physical aggression.

The inclusion of the intervention strategy time out in chapter 11 however was, for me, disappointing as I have concerns about the ability, particularly of young people with insecure attachment organisations, to manage difficult emotions on their own. I question its inclusion in a handbook designed to strengthen the relationship between caregiver and young person and feel that it reflects a general theme in the handbook that is misguided. The main focus of the book is on changing the young person's behaviour. It is clear to me we need to concentrate on more than just behaviour. Nurturing a young person's confidence and self-esteem, and supporting the development of social skills and secure attachments are the outcomes we should be aspiring to achieve. All of these positive outcomes would naturally lead to positive changes in behaviour, but rather than that being our sole aim, our focus would be on nurturing the skills required by the young person to realise their potential. It seems likely that young people would intuitively be more amenable to an approach that supports their development rather than one aimed at fixing their behaviour.

I want to reflect a little more on the chapter relating to time out because the language used by the authors invoked strong emotions in me. Whilst they begin by addressing long-held concerns about the ethical issues surrounding the use of time out and caution against extended periods of isolation, the guidance given in the book with regards the implementation did not in any way alleviate my concerns.

When addressing the challenge of the child who refuses to take time out, the book instructs the reader to 'lead her firmly to the time-out place' (Pallet et al, p. 107). When presented with the challenge of the child who vandalises property when placed in time out, the reader is instructed to 'hold her accountable for what she does – afterwards she must clear up any mess she has made, if she has broken something, pay for a replacement out of her own pocket money or lose a privilege' (ibid, p. 107). From my own experience as a residential carer, my concern over the use of time out emerged as a result of having to watch young people, forced to be on their own, struggle to manage their uncontrollable emotions which often resulted in violence, vandalism or self-harm. As a carer this was very difficult to watch and the emotional turmoil of wanting to go to a young person, to ease their pain and offer comfort for me was often overwhelming. The authors recognise how difficult this can be for foster carers presented with the distraught child who is pleading for the emotional connection to be re-established and comfort to be offered to ease their pain. They write 'this can be really upsetting and you may be tempted to give in... however you mustn't – the child needs to learn that she cannot get her own way' (ibid, p.

107). They ironically encourage the carer to have their partner or friend close by to offer support to ensure that they 'don't give in to the child's protests' (ibid, p. 107). Whilst they take the care to consider the emotional impact on the foster carer they do not afford the child the same respect or consideration. The primary motivation here is on changing the behaviour of the child and little meaningful consideration is given to ascertaining if the ends justify the means. They do not consider the impact of such an intervention on the relationship or the emotional health and well-being of the child and in my opinion its inclusion in this resource is a source of regret.

Whilst I recognise that some young people will, at times, benefit from a bit of distance from emotional stimuli in order to regain control of their emotions, the difference between this and what is being endorsed by this book is *choice*. Young people need to have access to consistent, emotionally responsive adults who use their relationship for therapeutic benefit. I feel that any form of time out, whereby an adult is forcing isolation on a young person or where the adult's availability is conditional and at risk of being withdrawn, has the potential to undermine the young person's sense of security. Not only does this risk an escalation in the young person's behaviour it also has the potential to undermine the positive relational work being undertaken and the young person's recovery. As such, I feel that we need to reject such one-dimensional approaches that seek to focus solely on changing behaviour in favour of approaches that promote reciprocity, connectivity and emotional containment in our relationships.

Despite the inclusion of time out within this book, I feel that the overall focus on relationships and identification of needs is reflective of how our understanding of child development has evolved. This has been supported by significant advances in our understanding of brain development which has led to a renewed interest in psychodynamic theories such as attachment. As practitioners then we must ensure that we apply these critical lenses to long-established practices such as time out to re-evaluate their effectiveness and therapeutic value. We must ensure that we embrace opportunities to connect with young people in a way that focuses on 'needs' not 'deed' and that we use our relationships purposefully to enhance the well-being of the young people in our care.

About the author

Erica Barr has worked in residential child care for 8 years, primarily as a residential worker and latterly as a senior residential worker with South Ayrshire Council. Erica is currently undertaking the MSc in Advanced Residential Child Care and has an interest in the therapeutic value of relationship based practice.

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