

Received: 12/09/2023

Accepted: 21/09/2023

Keywords:

Relationships, leadership, understanding trauma, well considered matching, optimism, Scotland.

DOI:

<https://doi.org/10.17868/strath.00087200>

Short Article

Reasons to be cheerful: Factors making a positive difference to children in residential care in Scotland

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Abstract:

The Care Inspectorate, the regulator for care homes for children in Scotland, has analysed some of the key factors that contribute to our evaluations of high performing services. These services are making a positive difference to the children and young people living in them. Many residential childcare services in Scotland are helping children experience a good, loving childhood, with their needs met and their rights upheld. This article will outline these factors and hopefully convey a sense of optimism regarding residential childcare in Scotland. These key messages were shared in an online session in April 2023.

Introduction

There are some serious challenges facing the residential sector in Scotland in 2023. Staff recruitment and retention is complex and difficult. While Scotland has welcomed the arrival of unaccompanied asylum-seeking young people, this work has created additional pressure on the sector. The levels of trauma experienced by many children and young people are high. Residential care operates within the wider public sector resource and cost of living crisis. Despite these very real difficulties, this article outlines that there are reasons to be cheerful and that many residential services are responding to children and young people with compassion and love. The Promise Oversight Board (2023) acknowledges that change is happening, and that progress is being made, with a commitment to keep the Promise embedded in many organisations. The report also highlights the importance of hope and encouragement. This article aims to support that message.

The Promise (2020a) highlighted that if children are not able to live with their families, then the focus of their care must be on building childhoods that are



underpinned by loving relationships, fun, play, education, and opportunity. The Care Inspectorate has tried to capture these messages in their current inspection methodology with key quality indicators 7.1 and 7.2 (2022b) focusing on the extent to which children and young people are safe, feel loved and get the most out of life, and on leaders and staff having the capacity and resources to meet and champion children and young people's needs and rights. When we look at services that are doing well in meeting these aspirations, some key messages emerge, some of which this article summarises. The Care Inspectorate believe that these messages celebrate the positive work that is going on in the sector and are hopeful and optimistic. These messages were outlined in a Care Inspectorate webinar (2023).

Relationships

In high performing residential services that support children to have a good childhood, stable loving relationships thrive. Staff working with children have time to let loving relationships develop and to be sustained, they are supported to do so, and understand trauma-informed approaches. Children feel safe and trust the adults caring for them. Affection, warmth, fun, empathy, nurturing, and a gentle response to distress are integral to the culture of these services. Children experience relationships as authentic and meaningful. The Pinky Promise (2020b, p. 9) stated: 'What is important to children is that children are loved and feel loved. Children said they want relationships that are important to them to be protected and allowed to grow.' Positive caring relationships between the adults and children in residential services are not new. The increased awareness of the importance of these relationships and approaches to support them in many services is welcomed. Loving relationships with attuned adults help provide necessary support and scaffolding for children and young people. This can help them feel connected and valued. In high performing services we are observing warm, stable relationships underpinning all aspects of the care children and young people receive.

The shift in the language used so that children, young people, staff, and the regulator now routinely use the word love in this context is also something to celebrate (Love InC, 2022).

Knowledge and understanding of trauma

A recurring feature in the residential services the Care Inspectorate are evaluating as very good or excellent is an understanding of the impact of trauma on the children and young people cared for. This understanding permeates all aspects of these services. We find that there are huge benefits when there is an investment in training which gives staff an understanding of the impact of trauma on how affected children and young people experience their world. This understanding and knowledge is then translated into how the children and young people are cared for and responded to. Staff can make the link between behaviour and trauma. We see staff who can tune into how children are feeling,



who are able to enable co-regulation. Staff have an understanding of the need to be present and emotionally available. We see care plans that are trauma-informed and compassionate. Instead of responding to behaviour in a reactive or punitive way there is an enhanced understanding of the feelings behind the behaviour, such that responses are attuned and individualised. The National Trauma Training Programme (2021) principles of safety, choice, collaboration, trustworthiness, and empowerment are embedded in these cultures. There is also a culture of learning and reflection. Investment in training and continuing discussion and learning about trauma is making a positive difference in many services. Again, this development and sector wide commitment is something to be cheerful about and to build on. High quality residential childcare settings in Scotland are investing in this approach, which is making a huge difference to outcomes and experiences for children in these services.

Considered and careful matching of children to residential services

Our evaluations of services that are delivering compassionate and loving care to children in Scotland indicate that very carefully considered matching of children to the right resource for them is essential. Having the time and space to understand what a child or young person needs and what their story is makes a positive difference to that child's outcomes and experiences. Considered thinking about what the individual child needs and whether the staff team have the right skills to meet these needs underpins effective matching decisions. Are there enough staff to provide individualised care to that child or young person?

Are there appropriate resources that have availability nearby to support the young person? Is the location and environment going to work well for that child or young person? Will the location support connection with the people who are important to that child or young person? Does the staff team feel confident that they can care for an individual child or young person with compassion and love? Is the potential placement going to fit in with a children's rights approach? Purposeful contemplation of important questions allows services to effectively support children, ensure they are in the right place, and minimise the chances of further moves, which may be experienced as rejection.

Analysis of risks and how these can be reduced and managed need to be factored in. Deliberation about how well a child or young person will fit in with other children and young people needs to be part of the process. Can the service safely meet the needs of all children and young people? Are there enough staff with appropriate qualifications and experience to meet all the needs of the children and young people? Having a rigorous well considered matching process, as outlined in the Care Inspectorate guidance (2022c), is an essential component of delivering high quality care. Within this context sometimes it will be the right decision for the service to assess that at a particular point in time they are not well placed to respond to an individual child or young person's needs. Being part of a wider environment that respects and listens to that assessment is a key part of ensuring residential care is of a high standard.



Recognising this and building wider capacity to ensure that all of Scotland's children can have their needs met is part of Scotland's wider commitment to keep The Promise. The Care Inspectorate recognises there are complexities and challenges for many services within the current Scottish context, but our analysis of what works at an individual service level is that this is a key component. It is important to recognise and build on this understanding so that all children, as far as possible, are matched to a service that is right for them.

Leadership

Effective leadership, both within the residential service and providing external support, is critical to delivering high quality residential care for children and young people in services in Scotland. Leadership is pivotal in terms of establishing a culture that responds sensitively to the often-complex needs of children and young people. Establishing a culture that understands trauma and responds in a way that is healing needs leaders that have that informed understanding themselves. They can model this and ensure staff get impactful training. Leaders can ensure there is a culture that is reflective and loving, with safe spaces created for staff to reflect. They set the tone that makes the residential house a home that children and young people may heal and thrive in. Leaders who are aspirational and embrace research and feedback from children and young people can drive up standards. Effective and responsive quality assurance that supports improvement has an impact on what happens for children and young people and the staff who support them. Leadership which is ambitious for children and young people usually underpins high quality day-to-day life in residential services. In Scotland we are seeing leaders who are striving to do better, through buying into the aspirational agenda of The Promise. We see leaders who are committed to reducing restraint for children and young people in residential care, who are supporting the rights of children and young people, and who speak out on their behalf. They are taking on board messages from The Promise about language that is child focused and non-stigmatising. They ensure that as far as possible children have what they need to support connection, adjusting staffing and resources as needed. They work hard to ensure matching is right at individual service level. They contribute to wider strategic discussions about ensuring there are resources that meet children's needs and have in-depth knowledge of trauma. This powerful and authentic leadership within the residential houses in our high performing services is making a valuable difference to how those services are supporting the children and young people living in them. External leaders who provide appropriate support and challenge and are committed to the best possible outcomes also contribute hugely to the effectiveness of well performing services. They champion the rights and needs of the children in their care. It is important to recognise and celebrate the leadership and commitment within residential care in Scotland. Very good care does not just happen, and the passion, energy, and commitment in our high performing services in Scotland is a very important reason to be cheerful, giving the sector the hope and energy to move forward.



Conclusion

This article has set out some of the common denominators in high performing residential services that are caring for children. Each service is of course unique, and there is no magic formula or tick box approach for the complex task of ensuring traumatised children feel loved and get the most out of life.

Nevertheless, the key factors briefly outlined feature in services that are getting it right. The sector can continue to evolve and develop and build on these vital strengths going forward. There is much to be cheerful about.

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