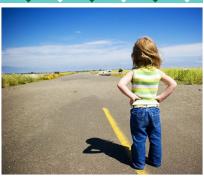# 5+2 Journeys: Supporting Midlothian's Most Vulnerable Young People

Midlothian Council Educational Psychology Service

The "Journeys" research project: why does it matter?

During session 2012-13, Midlothian Council placed five children aged 12 and under in residential schools outwith the area. This was concerning due to the proportionately high number and because of their age: only 10% of the residential schools' population are primary pupils (Scottish Government, 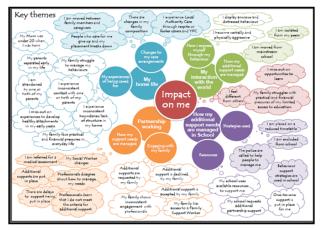2007). The outcomes for young people in residential care are poorer than those for young people looked after in other care settings and non-LAC pupils; they are less likely to achieve national qualifications and are significantly more likely to leave school earlier, develop physical or mental health difficulties, become homeless and become young parents.   For this reason, Midlothian Council wished to explore the reasons behind the children's placement in residential schools and see how we could better meet the needs of vulnerable children at a local level.

The EPS and Business Transformation Team carried out case study analyses of the five children to identify what had happened and what could have been different.   Throughout 2013 and 2014, the findings were shared with Service Managers, Children and Families staff, Education staff, Elected Members of the local authority and with the Scottish Children's Reporter Administration (SCRA).   The research has been used to engage all professionals in exploring alternative ways of supporting our most vulnerable children and young people within mainstream settings.

The 5 Journeys

The case study analyses took a whole system approach, placing the child at the centre and focusing on the impact of their life experiences.   A "pathway" was drawn for each child charting the key events in their lives prior to their placement in residential school. The information was used to establish key themes that affected all the children.

The thematic network highlighted four separate areas that impacted on the child's life: their home life experiences, how they interact within the world, how partnership working was effected and how their needs were managed in school.

5+2: Working to achieve positive outcomes

Sharing the findings has reinforced the message that "a Midlothian child is a Midlothian child" (quote from a C&F practitioner) and has prompted professionals to work together more effectively, seeking creative solutions to support children and young people in their local schools.   Two such cases, where children with similar early experiences to the original five were being considered for specialist provision but were supported creatively in their mainstream school, were reviewed by Trainee Educational Psychologists working with the team. The additional two cases confirmed the earlier findings about the barriers to successful inclusion but illustrated the factors in making mainstream school work for vulnerable pupils.

What are the risk factors?

The 5+2 research highlighted a number of factors which increase the risk of children being placed in a residential school.

Home life experiences

Unsurprisingly, having fewer opportunities to develop secure early attachments coupled with repeated experiences of loss or abandonment lead to children finding it difficult to maintain positive, trusting relationships with others. This in turn can lead to care placement breakdown, frequent moves and further experience of loss.

Partnership working

The effectiveness of support from the multi-agency team affects the potential for children to be supported successfully in their home community. Barriers to effective partnership working include: families feeling excluded from the multi-agency team; families being unable or unwilling to accept support, or feeling that the support offered is too intrusive; professional disagreements around the support that is needed; a time-lag between support being requested and put in place.

Children's ability to interact well in their world

Children who lack emotional literacy, self-regulation strategies and communication skills are more likely to express their anxiety and distress in socially undesirable ways. They are more likely to present with behaviour that challenges those who try to help such as professionals and peers, thereby becoming socially isolated.

How children's needs are supported in school

A long-term reduction of access to education, either through fixed-term exclusion or continuing part-time timetables, is a major barrier to successful outcomes for vulnerable children. Children view themselves as different from their peers and lose confidence in their social and academic skills. Recurrent exclusions or long-term part-time timetables can mean that caregivers have to change their working hours or leave work altogether to look after a child who is usually in school which can have a lasting impact on family finances and parental well-being.

So what can we do?

The +2 research identified excellent practice in supporting vulnerable primary-aged children. This work has proved successful in the here and now and is laying the foundations for more successful outcomes in the future. Four key aspects of replicable practice were noted.

Relationships

The development and maintenance of positive relationships is imperative. This includes a wide network of relationships such as the child and his peers, the child and her carer, the child and school staff, professionals and the child's family. Children need to feel that there is a "safe" adult in their lives to whom they can express their emotions. Helping a vulnerable child to develop friendships builds resilience and self-esteem as the child begins to see themselves as likeable and liked by others.

Inclusion

Including a child starts with listening to their voice and ensuring that their views are represented in plans and target setting. Children need to be given very clear boundaries and expectations while transitions need to be carefully planned and supported. Professionals working with the child, especially in schools, need to understand that social skills such as waiting or turn-taking may not be on a par with the child's peers and will need to be explicitly taught. Successful inclusion comes with the involved adults feeling confident about supporting the child's needs and that they can work with others to develop their own skills.

Developing self-awareness

Teaching children about their emotions and how to regulate them is one of the most influential factors in helping them to cope. Explicitly describing how emotions feel in the body and what they can do to manage them helps children learn how to behave in a range of situations. Children need to be able to recognise that they have strengths and adults noticing their successes, however small, will help them build resilience and develop a positive view of themselves.

Partnership working

Strong partnership working, where all professionals understand the family's situation and are sensitive to the child's needs, is the key to success. As relationships between professionals and the family strengthen, so the likelihood of school and care placements being maintained is increased. Excellent practice occurs naturally when all involved are committed to achieving success.

Where next for our research?

The 5+2 research is far from complete and will be added to over the coming years. We hope to continue to use this work as a local evidence base for continuing to ensure best practice in Midlothian. We will share the key messages of the research with all education staff to continue to increase the likelihood of positive long-term outcomes for Midlothian's most vulnerable children and young people. We hope to support school staff in linking this information to the curriculum through our ongoing work on Visible Learning as both strands of research highlight the importance of positive teacher-pupil relationships. All children and young people need adults to believe in them and champion them, helping them to defeat destiny (Donaldson, 2014). For a video highlighting the importance of teacher-pupil relationships, visit:

For more information . . .

Contact your link Educational Psychologist