

Real-time communication in residential care*

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Relational Child and Youth Care Practice 20 (4) 5-11 (2007)

* A modified version of this paper appears in: Lefevre, M. & Luckock, B. (ed) (2008) *Direct Work: Social Work with Children and Young People in Care*. London, BAAF.

Working with young people in residential settings can feel quite different to other forms of social work, partly because things may be much less structured and formal than working in an office or using official meeting-rooms, and partly because there is so much more time available in which to work alongside the young people and gradually build up a relationship. Much of the most valuable work arises 'on the hoof', in the midst of everyday activities such as watching TV or eating supper, or it may develop out of conflicts or moments of sadness or anxiety in 'real time', perhaps straight after a difficult phone call or on the way to a visit home, rather than being recalled or anticipated in a planned meeting. Sometimes the pattern of communication will develop slowly and piecemeal over a number of hours or days, with comments or reflections being added or reminders put in as the situation moves on. It is therefore important for workers to develop an awareness of how communication may build up over time but also how it may 'erupt' in heated moments, often triggered by very minor incidents. They also need the ability to hold in mind the different levels at which young people may communicate both directly (verbally) and indirectly through actions, silences, physicality and symbolism. The advantage of the residential setting (likewise of foster care) is that the potential for this real-time communication is immense, but using this potential does depend on the sensitivity and skill of the workers.

Inter-relationships and Group Dynamics

Communicating in residential care also relies critically upon an awareness of the group and how it operates, as well as on the workers' ability to capitalise on the opportunities for mutual support and understanding which may arise in the group. The 'group' in this context means not only the group of young people and their relationships with each other, but also the group or team of staff – as well as the *whole* group of staff and young people together (Brown and Clough 1989). There is a constant ebb and flow of feeling and awareness across the whole group in relation not only to the ongoing dramas of children's lives, but also to their relationships both with each other and with their families and friends, as well as the interplay between all of these elements and the dynamics of the staff group and their own networks and relationships (Emond 2002, 2005). These complex inter-relationships and large-group dynamics are there whether we choose to acknowledge them or not (Ward 1993), and indeed they may not always be immediately apparent in each dialogue between worker and child, although they are the texture within which everything else is woven, and often the individual conversations may make little sense without a full awareness of the whole pattern. Workers therefore need to develop the ability to work within and across groups, picking up on the subtleties of interaction at every level, and keeping all of this in mind even when they are engaged in a one-to one conversation (Stokoe 2003).

These group interactions are happening all the time and require monitoring and intervention throughout any day's work, but the best way to capitalise on them is for the residential unit to evolve a pattern of group meetings both for the young people themselves and for the whole group of staff and children, drawing on the traditions of the 'community meeting' in therapeutic communities (Worthington 2003a,). These meetings can be used to promote a culture of open and honest communication, and to allow for the expression of those strong feelings which inevitably arise in everyday life in such settings. An essential component in promoting good communication with young people in residential care is therefore to establish and sustain a pattern of regular 'open' meetings between staff and young people, in which matters of concern can be safely raised. It takes time and patience to establish such meetings (Ward 1995) because it involves building an atmosphere of trust and mutual

respect and enabling both staff and children to develop the confidence to work in this way, but once they are established they can become the 'hub' around which much of the work of the place revolves.

One-to-one relationships

In addition to these aspects of communication, residential care also provides the opportunities for intensive one-to-one relationships in which a worker can offer a combination of practical and emotional support to an individual child, often focused on the child's ongoing concerns about their future as well as their past (Worthington 2003b). In some cases these 'key' relationships may be centred on a sequence of planned meetings, although again much of the work will arise from the opportunities which develop in the course of everyday life and its challenges (see my earlier chapter in this book). For many young people it is this key relationship which can provide a means of unlocking the anxieties and even despair within which they may feel trapped, providing a consistent and reliable relationship in the midst of the turmoil into which they may have been thrown by their circumstances, and offering the hope that, with the help of a trusted figure, things may begin to improve and even resolve (Anglin 2004). These may begin to sound like high hopes, and the challenge is certainly great, but the possibilities are genuinely there if they are understood and fully used, though always within the professional structures of supervision and accountability for the worker.

In this chapter we will explore one small example of such communication between a child and a worker, mostly focused on the key relationship between the two of them, but also drawing on the 'texture' of group and team relationships as described above. It is a fictional example drawing upon elements of actual events, edited here to draw attention to certain key factors. After we leave this story we will return to some further reflections on the nature of the work.

Gary and Linda

Gary felt sad: he was warm, but he was not happy. He lay on his bed, thumb in mouth, eyes shut, rocking gently from side to side, side to side. He couldn't understand why it had happened again: everyone seemed to hate him, everybody knew how bad he was and hated him for it. Everything he said just made people angry. Even saying nothing seemed to make them angry. He swallowed hard, rocked again, clamped his other hand around the one with its thumb in his mouth and tried not to cry. It was late on Friday evening and the rest of the house was quiet; some of the others were out still but he couldn't face it. He couldn't really face anything, even himself.

At 12, Gary was on his own, or that was how it felt. His Mum had had enough of him, his Dad had gone years ago, his step-Dad was always so violent, and his sisters too little to understand. He did see his Mum and sisters sometimes, when he went home for a weekend, but it never seemed to work out and he always came back feeling worse. This time he was more worried, because he just knew something bad was going to happen at the weekend.

Someone was in the doorway. Gary kept on rocking, eyes shut though he knew someone was there, but he listened. It was Linda – he knew it, she would always come up quietly like this and wait there by the door. Sometimes she would just say nothing for a long time, just like him. This time she said his name quietly, and he stopped rocking for a minute, then started again. He knew it was her and he made a sort of mumbling sound, not saying anything, just being himself inside, secretly hoping that she might guess how he felt. A tiny pulse of relief touched him at the thought that at last someone had come to talk to him rather than ignoring him or shouting him down as everyone else seemed to.

This went on for ages. She was still standing there. Why didn't she go? She always did this, like she knew what was happening, as if she could read his mind. In fact he liked this idea, but he couldn't tell her that, in case it broke the spell.

He rocked himself in something more like a rhythm now, to and fro, side to side, almost comfortable in his sadness. He grew tired and lay still, his eyes still shut. Linda must have moved closer and sat down, because this time when she spoke his name the voice was much closer and he could almost feel the warmth of her breathing. In the distance someone was washing up and the telly was on: maybe the others had come back. He liked hearing these sounds in the background, too – it made the house feel a bit more open, like there was always someone around, someone else in case he didn't get on with Linda. And he liked hearing his name, almost as if it proved to him that he really was Gary and that it was worth somebody calling him by his real name, instead of some of the abuse he got from the others.

"I thought I'd just come and sit with you" said Linda, and Gary listened intently, then rocked again. His mind was upside down and his heart was racing. He was a bit out of breath now from the rocking – he was big for his age and it took a lot of energy to keep rocking like that, but he needed to do it. They had put an extra mattress by the side of his bed so that he wouldn't bang his head or make too much noise if he did need to rock, and that made it feel almost cosy, which he liked. At least if he was warm there he could feel a bit special in himself. Now Linda was listening – she hadn't said she was, but he knew that she listened and he liked that too. He didn't know how to say anything, but it was good to know that somebody might be ready to listen, just in case he could say something one day.

"Are you worried about tomorrow?" asked Linda. "No!" said Gary, although he knew she wouldn't believe that. He rocked again, eyes still shut. "I just wondered", she said, "I noticed you coming upstairs after that argument and I heard you rocking. I thought you sounded worried". "I didn't say I was worried, did I?" Gary replied quickly, then rocked again. "You didn't need to" said Linda. Then Gary stopped rocking and went very quiet; he held his eyes very slightly open for a moment – just the width of half an eyelash – then closed them tight again. Still she just sat there, not looking at him now, just gazing past him at the wall, as if she was thinking something to herself.

"You never come with me when I go home!" he said, then wondered where that had come from. "I did come with you at first", she replied, "But then I thought you wanted to go there yourself on the bus. To make your own way there." He couldn't answer that, because he knew it was true, and in any case he didn't want to be seen with a care worker walking up to his house: that would only land him in more trouble with the kids down the road. He kept quiet, but now rocked his head just slightly, keeping his body still and thoughtful. "Full up of stuff," he thought to himself, "full up of stuff, nobody listens, even Linda doesn't really understand. Nobody really knows". "You're never here on a Saturday anyway" he said, again surprising himself at speaking his mind so clearly, because he knew he was really shy inside. "Yes I am," she replied, a bit hurt about that, because it seemed to her that she was always working weekends. She let that go, but said "I will be here in the morning, if you do want me to come along". Gary said nothing. His eyes were shut again, but he was glad, because he'd got a promise out of her, and he knew she kept her promises. One time she had even come back in when she was off duty, just to take him to the doctor's. He held on to his sheet with one hand, thumb still in mouth, and pulled the pillow close to his ear with the other as if he didn't want to hear what she was saying.

"Is it just too difficult at home at the moment?" she asked him, but this time there was no reply. She sat there for a while longer, thinking that she had maybe pushed a bit too far now, and decided to retreat for a few minutes. "Would you like a hot chocolate?" she tried. "All right" he replied, "But not too hot, you know how I like it." "I do," she said, "I'll be back". She went downstairs and made the drink, grabbing a quick word with Aysha, her colleague, explaining to her what she thought was happening with Gary. "I noticed how jumpy he was when he came in from school", said Aysha. Gary was just coming to the end of his first year in high school, and things were not easy for him, but he had held himself together through most of this term, keeping his more troubled behaviour for the children's home. Aysha had noticed that he had talked enthusiastically this afternoon about his 'WRM' classes. "What's that?" asked Linda. "Working with Resistant Materials" said Aysha, "It's what they used to call woodwork". "I should think Gary's a real

expert.” observed Linda, and they smiled. Linda went back upstairs with the drink, but Gary was asleep now, so she set it down beside his bed and stroked his head then gently closed the door. Linda and Aysha together managed the return of the remaining young people from their evening out, sitting with one of them in the kitchen for half an hour while the others dispersed to their rooms.

Linda wrote up some notes on Gary’s evening in his records, and reflected that even the little that he had communicated directly was a real step forwards: he was usually so shut away in himself, angry, withdrawn or both, that it was often very hard to reach him. She had sometimes had to sit with him for half an hour before he would say anything at all, whereas this time he had at least indicated that he needed more support with his home visits, even if he couldn’t say much more. She had noticed him opening his eyes slightly to check that she was still there, and took this as a sign that he was looking for more communication. She had been his key-worker for several months now, and felt that he was possibly just starting to trust her and value his times with her. Trust was a difficult thing with these kids, though, and no sooner did you think you’d achieved it than they would rip it apart and rip you apart too if you weren’t careful. Linda wondered whether she had pushed too hard in asking the direct question about how hard things were at home, or whether he would have said more if she hadn’t gone to fetch the drink, but nothing was certain in this work, and she decided on balance that she had at least given him the opportunity to make a clear statement about feeling too anxious to go home if he had needed to. She also realised that she had not followed up with Gary on the argument downstairs which had provoked him into seeking refuge in his bedroom, but she judged that this had just been a ‘trigger’ for him, and although the argument would need to be acknowledged and resolved with the child in question, it would be unhelpful to make too much of it.

Linda decided that she would offer to go part of the way home with Gary in the morning, perhaps walking as far as the bus stop or maybe driving him most of the way home, in the hope of offering him a bit more time to talk, and to

confirm that she recognised his need for support. She had found that he could sometimes talk more openly about himself in a more neutral or safe setting than in the residential home. She thought she might also give him some small token or reminder of herself to take with him, so that even if she could not be there at home with him he could maybe keep her more clearly in mind. Perhaps she would give him a packet of chewing gum or maybe something a bit more permanent – a button or buckle – something which suggested fastening – the ability to attach? The trick would be to offer him something in a way which would be acceptable to him and allow him to acknowledge (at least to himself) that it might help. To another child, Terry, an older girl, she had given a tiny Lego figure in a baseball cap and carrying a little bag, after Terry had been fiddling with this figure when she came across it in Linda's car as she was getting a lift to school. Terry had kept hold of this figure for months while she lived at the home and now she that she was living in a hostel she had it glued to her key-ring.

Linda realised that Gary was quite worried about this week's visit home, but after conferring with Aysha and re-reading his notes she judged that there was no reason to question this visit or intervene directly in it, despite Gary's increasingly tense relationship with his step-father. She felt rather that he should be monitored on return and she decided that she would suggest to her manager that there should be a meeting with Gary's social worker soon to review his home visits, discuss them with him and examine how he could be more fully supported towards his eventual return home, which was clearly causing some anxiety all round. In any case she also knew that the social worker would not be available to discuss this with over the weekend even if she had wanted to.

The above scenario will perhaps be familiar to many residential workers – and probably to foster carers too. The need to stay in good communication with each of the young people, despite their many individual difficulties, and to set this against the need to keep everyday life going and as 'normal' as possible,

involves aiming for some balance between the 'ordinary' events of everyday life and the 'special' needs of each individual (Ward 2006). Linda saw beyond Gary's apparently reluctant manner and difficult – even aggressive – behaviour, which might be off-putting in 'ordinary' life, and she recognised some of his underlying emotional and physical needs. She could acknowledge his need for comfort and self-comfort, accepting some element of regression in his rocking and thumb-sucking, and offering him an acceptable form of physical support by sitting close to him and offering him a warm drink – even remembering how he liked this drink. These small practical details in everyday life, including warmth and comfort, food and drink, are of real significance in helping young people feel valued enough to take the bigger steps of attempting verbal communication about what really matters to them (Carter 2003).

Meanwhile Linda could try to move forward the direct verbal communication by asking Gary direct questions in a way which seemed to enable him to speak his mind even though he found this very hard and she eventually decided it was best to 'back off' a bit. She could also offer him some symbolic communication in terms of some little object which might help him to hold himself together by keeping it in mind that she would be thinking about him. She had noticed that this sort of thing could mean a lot to children in such turmoil, even though they might seem 'hard' on the surface, and reluctant to acknowledge their 'softer' needs. She believed it was better if this sort of symbolic object evolved naturally out of the time she spent with the child (Dockar-Drysdale 1990), and it would often be something which might appear trivial to anyone else but which had come to mean something to this child – but occasionally she had decided just to offer some spontaneous little gift if she felt that would help. Linda also knew that at the 'house meeting' the next morning it would be important to acknowledge the argument that had provoked Gary's anger, and that this might just provide the opportunity for the young people to share with each other some of the distress and anxiety about home contacts which several of them had in common. She was aware that some of them talked about such matters when the adults were not around

(Emond 2002) but felt that they could gain much from being able to talk more in the meetings about this.

Linda felt positive about Gary and genuinely wanted to help him, but she also tried to keep their relationship well within the appropriate boundaries, by sharing all her discussions with him with her colleagues and writing up her notes in his records, as well as by conferring with the manager and with Gary's social worker from the Looked-after Children's team. She would go out of her way to help and support him, but not to the extent of letting her concern override her other responsibilities. She found this sort of close direct relationship with young people rewarding as well as challenging, and had found that she especially valued the chance in supervision to reflect on what was developing in her work with the children. If ever supervision was cancelled or interrupted, she felt a real loss to the quality of her work and her understanding of where she was going in it – it was like the tiller which she used to control her professional 'rudder'. At times she could feel quite overwhelmed herself by the awful sadness or bleakness of the children's lives, and then feel that she was useless to really help them – whereas in fact this was often because she was 'picking up' the children's despair and experiencing as if it was her own (Shohet 1999). Supervision would help her to regain her balance and direction so that she could somehow be both a real person to them as well as being an employed professional who had chosen to do this work to make her living – as well as having a life of her own!

Reflecting on the challenges

Here we shall leave the story of Gary and Linda, although of course the story would continue right through the weekend, and when Gary returned to the home on Sunday night whoever was on duty would need to be sensitive to Gary's anxieties on his return. Linda would need to pick up the threads with him when she was next on duty, and the whole episode would need to be integrated into the pattern of his care.

It is worth reflecting further on the complex challenge of Linda's work and on the skills which she is called upon to use. She certainly has a lot of 'multi-tasking' to do, as she keeps Gary in mind while also working with the whole group of young people. She has to combine close personal care and attention for the young people on an everyday and sometimes mundane basis with retaining a sense of the professional task with which she is engaged, ensuring that all of her work with the young people is geared towards supporting them in their journey through placement and into their future (Hill, 2000; Milligan and Stevens 2006). She also has to work with a lot of uncertainty and negativity – accepting rejection by young people who have been rejected themselves so many times, but staying available to them when they are ready to seek more help. She has to rely on her intuition at times – like gauging when to withdraw for a moment to allow a child space to reflect, without at the same time creating a feeling of abandonment at a critical moment.

In this sense communicating with troubled young people is very much an art rather than a science. You can use all sorts of knowledge and even 'techniques' at times, but at the heart of it all is an innate sensitivity to the variations in children's moods and in their ability to express themselves, plus the ability to monitor your own emotions and understand your complicated reactions to the many twists and turns which you will encounter (Crompton, 1980, 1990). For this reason among the most useful knowledge you will need will be self-knowledge: understanding more about what it is in your own life which has led you to choose this sort of work, as well as thinking about what sorts of things may have helped you most in your own darker times – such as talking with friends, seeking physical comfort or exercise, activity or a sense of escape – and reflecting upon how you may be able to provide some of this for the young people you are working with (Winnicott, 2004). At the same time of course you have to be careful not to seek to re-live your own traumas through the young people. Thus having experienced your own difficulties in life is not a disqualification (nor, it should be noted, is it a qualification!): what is important is to have learned from your difficulties and reflected on what they

have taught you not only about yourself but also about how people in difficulty can be helped (Smith 2006).

Working towards this sort of self-knowledge is not a one-off activity or simply the product of an 'experiential' weekend, but an ongoing and even life-long commitment to learn more, develop more and thus be able to offer more while still preserving and even enhancing your own personal sense of self. These are qualities which need to be learned although they cannot easily be taught! We have mentioned supervision and the use of staff support meetings: many of the most successful child care workers also seek their own experience of counselling or psychotherapy as a means of understanding and nurturing what is after all the most important and precious 'tool of the trade': your self. Some specialised training courses also include an explicit element of self-development (Ward and McMahon 1998), although this is probably more common these days in counselling courses than social work courses. Without such a component there is a risk that the training, and the work, will remain hollow and shallow, and will ultimately help neither the young people nor their families. It is also the responsibility of managers and training departments to ensure that their staff have access to appropriate support and development in this just as in the more pragmatic aspects of their work.

In conclusion, my aim in this chapter has been to create an impression of what is involved in supporting and communicating with children in residential settings, looking in particular at the role of the 'keyworker' in the context of a team and set within the overall framework of the larger group of children and their carers. We have seen the importance of patience, listening and attending to physical comfort, of offering and accepting symbolic communication as well as direct verbal engagement, and of understanding how communication patterns need to be monitored and attended to as they build up over a period of weeks and even months. I have called this 'real-time communication', because much of it relates to current and immediate anxieties ongoing in the child's life, even though the feelings which are triggered off often relate to the child's deeper and more long-running concerns. Some of the most helpful interventions may be made at the unlikeliest times and in surprising places.

We have also seen the value of intuition, self-knowledge and supervision as the core of the discipline and the need for an ongoing commitment to such self-knowledge on the part of both the staff and their managers.

* *This chapter appears in: Lefevre, M. & Luckock, B. (ed) (2008) Direct Work: Social Work with Children and Young People in Care. London, BAAF.*

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