



Why it is especially important for social workers to build rapport with children in care: A case example

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Abstract

Children in care are highly vulnerable, especially during their first few years of entry to care, not only because of their pre-care experiences of abuse and/or neglect from the family of origin but also due to the placement instability in care. The children usually experience a number of short-term placements, at least initially, due to which they do not get the opportunity to become closer to any one caring adult for a considerable time period in place of the parents from whom they have been removed. Consequently, they have to function in a world with no constant adult to care for them with whom they have bonded. This discussion suggests that social workers could fill in the void caused by the absence of a significant adult in the lives of children in care and, uses a case example to illustrate this.

Key Words: children, out-of-home care, rapport, social workers

Introduction

All human services workers are familiar with the concept of establishing rapport with their clients, a condition within which the clients perceive their worker to be understanding, trustworthy and genuinely interested in their wellbeing (Martin, 1995, p.34). However, rapport is especially an important and invaluable attribute when the work involves children in state care. This is because the children in care are a highly vulnerable group whose parents have, for a number of apparent reasons, failed to nurture and protect them according to generally acceptable standards. Out-of-home care placements, at least during the initial period, are often very unstable with children being moved around in a number of short-term placements. The children, therefore, do not get an opportunity to establish a secure attachment to a substitute parent-figure for a substantial period of time after entering care in place of the parents that the circumstances have forced them to leave behind (Barber & Delfabbro, 2006). This is why it is especially important for the social/welfare workers who are dealing with children in care to ensure that the children are closely connected with at least one trusted adult to whom they could turn when they are in need of support—physical, social or emotional. Using a case example drawn from my PhD research, in the following discussion, I will illustrate that the social workers are well-placed to become a significant adult in the lives of children in care particularly in the instances in which the children do not have a constant adult to take care of them.

Case Example

Clare [pseudonym] is a successful, university-educated, middle-age woman. However, she experienced severe adversity and disruption to her schooling in childhood. Due to her mother's irrational behaviour, the family moved from town to town very often and, Clare also had a stint in an orphanage. At the age of 14 when she was in year 10, Clare became a ward of the state with the help of a social worker. After that also her life did not run smoothly however, as she experienced five foster placements before going to university, two of which were during the year 12. By the time Clare completed year 12 she had been to 16 schools altogether. However, despite severe disturbances, she was determined to complete her secondary schooling and pursue higher education. Along this journey, Clare sought and received help from social workers in a number of occasions. The following excerpt taken from her interview illustrates the depth of trust and rapport that Clare had developed with a social worker.

I did my yr 10 placement at the [place] Community Health Centre with the social workers there [hm] and I thought 'right, this is what I am going to do' and I started to research what subjects I needed to do at school for yr 11 and yr 12 as prerequisites to get into a course. I looked into what courses there were. I spoke to my social worker, Martin [pseudonym] and he said to me "if you want to do social work, when you get closer to the time, I'll take you to wherever you want to go and see if I can introduce you to the course coordinator". So when it came to that time a couple of years later he was no longer my social worker because he changed jobs. But I rang him and said "Martin, you said that you would take me. This is still what I want to do. Can you take me there?" He took me there.

Not only had Martin taken Clare to university in order for her to find information but also he had filled in the gap caused by Clare's absent family at her graduation ceremony by attending with his wife and celebrating her achievement.

Discussion

Clare's story reflects a remarkable courage and determination in overcoming childhood adversity but it also shows how a social worker could take on the role of a significant adult in the lives of children in care when they so miserably miss one. Of course Clare had shown an extraordinary strength in character in negotiating her way through the barriers in her teenage years by drawing from the scarce resources that were available to her, and, of course Martin was evidently an exemplary social worker, Clare's story nevertheless signifies the enormous trust and rapport between a social worker and a client. Given the instability of Clare's placements—five placements in less than three years—it is clear that she did not get a chance to form a close and long-lasting relationship with any of her foster families. Social worker was the adult in her life at the time that she felt as a trustworthy person from whom she could ask a favour.

Clare's situation is, however, not unique. A lot of children entering care go through multiple placements and hence miss the opportunity to develop a secure attachment to a parent-figure (Barber & Delfabbro, 2004; Jackson & Simon, 2006; Thoburn, 1990; Wulczyn, Smithgall & Chen, 2009). A South Australian longitudinal study of 235 children found that 20.5 per cent of children had experienced between one and two placements, 19.7 per cent had between three and five placements and 17.5 per cent had between six and nine placements and 23.5 per cent had been placed at least 10 times previously (Delfabbro, Barber & Cooper, 2000). In another Australian study involving 59 children, Fernandez (2010) reports that the children in her sample have had on average 4.4 placements. Whilst these studies show the extent of

movement experienced by the children entering care in Australia, it is not a situation that is confined to Australia however. There is evidence suggesting that the children entering care in most English-speaking countries like Canada, UK and the USA also go through multiple placements (Drolet & Sauvè-Kobylecki, 2006; Jackson & Simon, 2006; Ward & Munro, 2010; Wulczyn, Smithgail & Chen, 2009), although there has been suggestion that there is more stability in foster care in some continental European countries such as Sweden and France (Gilligan, 2010).

The reason for children to be taken into state care, in the first place, is because they are assessed as at 'significant' risk of harm or suffered 'significant' harm due to physical abuse, sexual abuse, neglect and emotional maltreatment perpetrated by adults or older youths in their own homes or, when their parents or guardians are deemed unable to cope (AIHW, 2011). The circumstances leading to this could be crisis or hardship, family poverty, drug and alcohol addiction, mental illness, domestic violence, dislocation from domestic violence, divorce or separation and single parenthood (AIHW, 2011). Consequently, the children are already vulnerable by the time they enter care as they could suffer from trauma due to familial abuse and/or neglect, and, loss and grief due to rejection and separation from the family (Fernandez, 2006; Mills & Frost, 2007). Compounding the situation, they then experience a number of short-term placements in care until a decision is made regarding their long-term care (Delfabbro, Barber & Cooper, 2000; Orme & Buehler, 2009). During this period of instability, the children do not have a constant adult to take care of them and therefore, they do not get an opportunity to develop a close connection with a substitute parent-figure. What's more, the children who do not find a stable placement for a long time and, the adolescents who would soon move into independent living may never get an opportunity at all to develop a lasting relationship with a substitute family during their whole time in care.

Significant numbers of children are taken into state care each year in many Western countries. For example, there were 35,895 children in out-of-home care at 30th of June 2010 in Australia (AIHW, 2011); 44,400 children had been looked after continuously for 12 months at 31 March 2010 in England (National Statistics, 2011); and on September 30, 2009, there were an estimated 423,773 children in foster care in the USA (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2011). Out of these children, a sizeable proportion may not be able to reunite with their families, and, another proportion may not get the opportunity to develop a life-long relationship with a substitute family. It is not surprising, then, the rates of unemployment, poverty, homelessness, drug and alcohol addiction, mental illness, early parenting and criminal offences are found to be high among care leavers as absence of a supportive, caring adult from whom to draw support, guidance and inspiration during the childhood and adolescence has been linked to negative adult outcomes (Courtney, Piliavin, Grogan-Kaylor & Nesmith, 2009; Stein & Munro, 2008). Although Clare has become a successful adult through sheer determination, courage and a sharp foresight of her own, it is a fundamental human need that a caring, protective adult should be around to nurture and guide the children towards successful adulthood. Yet, as Clare's lived experience illustrates, some children in care are left to work out their future pathways on their own and therefore, it should not be expected that they would always know the best way to adulthood.

In light of the above facts, it is clear that the social workers have a critical role to play in ensuring the children entering care are closely connected with at least one supportive adult with whom they feel comfortable to discuss their emotional, social and physical issues. Clare's story illustrates how desperately the children in care could miss not having a caring adult in their lives. The social worker in Clare's case had developed so much trust and rapport with Clare that even when he was no longer her social worker he was the trusted adult that Clare could think of when she needed help as a teenager. In instances like Clare's in which the children do not have a constant adult to take care of them, it is especially important for social/welfare workers to build trust and rapport with the children so that they could feel there is at least one adult in their world that they know who they can trust and to whom they can turn when they need support.

Conclusion

Rapport is an important concept in social worker-client relationships, however, it is even more important when the client is a child in care. Children in care may not get the opportunity to build a lasting relationship with a caring adult mainly because they tend to go through a number of placements. Social workers can fill in this void by building rapport with the children and becoming a significant adult in their lives who they would trust and to whom they could turn when they are in need of support. Clare's lived experience is a testimony to the positive outcomes of worker-client relationship involving children in care that was built on rapport and enormous trust. Her story shows that not only is it possible for social workers to become a significant adult in the lives of children in care but also how important it is to become one in their lives.

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