



Head, Heart, Hands

Bringing up children in foster care: a social pedagogic approach

Evaluation Summary

Introduction

The Fostering Network has been successful in securing funding to embark on a major, four year programme of work to introduce social pedagogy into foster care across the UK and to explore the difference social pedagogy makes to children living in foster care. The major part of the funding is from charitable trusts including Comic Relief, Esmée Fairbairn Foundation, The Henry Smith Charity, The John Ellerman Foundation, KPMG Foundation, Man Charitable Trust and The Monument Trust.

The Head, Heart, Hands (HHH) programme is running in six demonstration sites; four in England and two in Scotland, representing a range of settings. The programme is being independently evaluated to examine the impact that social pedagogy has on children and young people in foster care, foster carers and the service personnel and system that seeks to support them. The evaluation will also identify examples of effective social pedagogic practice; differences in the way that social pedagogy is adopted across the six demonstration sites; and make recommendations to inform the systemic development of social pedagogy across UK foster care.

The evaluation team

The evaluation is being carried out by a highly experienced and well-qualified team led by the Centre for Child and Family Research (CCFR), Loughborough University, in partnership with the Colebrooke Centre for Evidence and Implementation, and Catch 22's National Care Advisory Service (NCAS). Janet Boddy, a specialist on social pedagogy, will serve as an expert consultant to the evaluation.

CCFR is one the country's best-respected centres of research on child and family services, and the researchers work widely with local authorities and other child welfare organisations both nationally and internationally (see www.lboro.ac.uk/research/ccfr/ for more details).

The Colebrooke Centre (www.cevi.org.uk) is an independent non-profit centre for implementation research and support in children's services, and NCAS (www.leavingcare.org) is the leading national body on policy and practice about young people making the transition from care to adult life.

Context

The latest figures suggest that there are at least 59,000 children looked after by 50,000 foster carers at any one time in the UK. Concerns about the rise in the numbers of children being placed in care, the financial pressures from the current economic climate, and the outcomes achieved by children looked after away from home, have resulted in the care system coming under political and public scrutiny in recent years.

What is social pedagogy?

Social pedagogy has been described as a philosophy, rather than a model of care. It identifies a 'way of thinking' about the child and how he or she might be supported by foster carers, social workers and others to grow up to realise his or her full potential and be a full member of society. It places great value on critical reflection; and an approach to managing risk which allows children to grow and learn. It has at its core recognition that adults and children live alongside each other and share the same space.

The Head, Heart, Hands programme refers to social pedagogy as a 'blend of academic knowledge and research (head), an understanding of emotions (heart), and practical skills and activity (hands) to help fostered children thrive. It puts foster carers at the heart of the child care team, and aims to empower them to help fostered children build relationships and make sense of their world in a way that leads to stability, better outcomes and long term wellbeing. At the same time the programme recognises that in order to develop a social pedagogic approach to foster care, changes are needed in the wider system that influences the way foster carers view and relate to their fostered children – both the immediate system of the fostering service and connected children's services, and also the wider political and societal system.

Social pedagogy is an underlying framework for social care in many continental European and Scandinavian countries. However, the framework is socially constructed, reflecting the values of society, and therefore the Head, Heart, Hands programme, and evaluation is exploring how the framework can be applied in the UK, rather than 'importing' a model of care.

The evaluation

Approach

It is the aim of the team that the evaluation will be of benefit to all stakeholders in the Head, Heart, Hands programme, and to external stakeholders with an interest in foster care in the UK. In recognition that learning will be continuously generated throughout the evaluation, an 'Action Research' approach will be adopted. This approach ensures that emerging findings are shared with stakeholders throughout the evaluation period.

Methods

The evaluation will be carried out using a mixed methods approach. The design comprises four complementary and integrated modules (see below). For each module, baseline data will be gathered on commencement of the evaluation and at two subsequent intervals throughout the evaluation period. This approach will enable short, medium and longer term impacts of the implementation of Head, Heart, Hands to be measured.

Module 1 is designed to evaluate the impact of Head, Heart, Hands on children and young people. These include the well-regarded peer research methodology jointly developed by NCAS and CCFR. Two cohorts of children will be followed up over a three year period, using complementary approaches that combine qualitative in-depth interviewing and quantitative measurement of wellbeing using standardised indicators. Methods include:

- Interviews with young people aged 13-18 using peer-research methods;
- Interviews with children under 13, led by CCFR researchers;
- Analysis of Management Information System and (electronic) case file data;
- Use of CCFR's validated *Cost Calculator for Children's Services* to analyse needs and outcomes data, and explore the costs and resource effectiveness of HHH.

Module 2 is designed to capture foster carers' experiences and evaluate changes in their learning and practice. This module utilises on-line surveys, face-to-face and telephone interviewing methods, and provides an opportunity for all foster carers that attend the Head, Heart, Hands learning and development courses to be involved in the evaluation.

Module 3 is designed to explore the system context and identify barriers and enabling factors in the successful implementation of Head, Heart, Hands, using a perspective underpinned by the emerging frameworks and tools of the implementation science field. It uses a mix of documentary review, repeated on-line surveys of social care personnel and those from partner agencies, and intensive case-study visits to all sites in a longitudinal design.

Module 4 is designed to embed an action-research approach by means of active dissemination and knowledge-exchange strategies.

The evaluation is due for completion in June 2016.

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