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# Professional boundaries in children's homes

by **Camilla Pemberton** on November 13, 2009 in **Looked after children, Residential care**

**How far should social care workers go in building relationships with children in residential care? Camilla Pemberton looks at where the limits should be set and whether befriending is possible in some circumstances**

Charlie, a key worker in a residential child care team in Coventry, remembers the moment he helped 16-year-old Jack\* through a relationship break-up. "Jack was devastated when his girlfriend broke up with him. I took him for a long walk, and we talked 'man-to-man'. I gave him advice and shared a similar experience in my life, which I had overcome."

Although Charlie usually avoided discussing personal information with young people in the home, he says the context made it seem the "right thing to do". Jack regards the experience as "transformational". "Charlie trusted me when he shared his own experiences. That really helped me."

But Rachel, a social worker from Essex, found sharing personal information with a young girl who was being bullied elicited a less positive response. "I thought it would help Katie\* to know I had been bullied once, but it didn't. It frightened her that someone she regarded as strong had been 'weak'. It changed the status quo of our relationship."

## **Wanted cigarettes**

For Lisa, a social care worker from Manchester, accepting a Christmas present from an 11-year-old on a therapeutic residential placement was a mistake. "In return, she wanted cigarettes," she says.

Behind each scenario lies a different lesson about the consequences of blurring professional boundaries in social care settings. "I was confident Jack would be helped by relaxing the boundaries," says Charlie. "I had worked with him for years and knew he was emotionally mature and well adjusted." But he concedes that "each child and context is different". "It's vital each situation is judged appropriately," he adds.

While parameters have to be set in any working relationship between an adult and a child, they must be drawn and managed sensitively in children's homes where young people also need "parenting".

Even the most innocuous relaxation of boundaries can lead to serious consequences.

One example occurred in a children's home when staff were excitedly discussing a colleague's 50th birthday party and were overheard by a teenager he worked with closely. Staff wanted to include Amy\* but senior management had to intervene, because alcohol would be served and colleagues, and their families, would be socialising together outside work. Amy was deeply hurt to learn that she could not attend, which in turn had an effect on her subsequent behaviour in the home.

Kevin Gallagher, chief executive of Bryn Melyn Care, which ran the children's home involved, says, in retrospect, the party should not have been discussed within earshot of young people. "A separate celebration at the home could have been arranged. This would have given Amy the positive relational experience in a safe and managed way," he says.

A preoccupation with boundaries, however, can leave homes feeling cold and clinical. Alice Richards, 21, grew up in a children's home. She points out that positive relationships are the first casualties of rigid boundary control and says workers need to "strike the right balance".

Mark Smith, professor of social work at Edinburgh University, agrees. "In some homes boundaries are confused with barriers," he says. "Barriers are impenetrable but boundaries are reflexive, negotiated relationships where professionals understand that what works with one child doesn't with another."

David Howe, a former social worker and professor of social work at the University of East Anglia, says boundaries are essential to help young people and workers stay safe – but should never prevent the building of "positive, meaningful relationships".

But managing boundaries can be difficult in practice, leading to calls for the GSCC to strengthen its guidance on professional boundaries for social care workers.

## **Humour works**

Kirsty Nelson, deputy manager of a Bryn Melyn Care children's home in north Wales, finds being honest and upfront with young people helps maintain boundaries, while allowing positive relationships to develop. "Humour also works too – then you're having a joke when you have to say 'no'."

But Nelson has learned to relax some boundaries as young people grow up. "They must be allowed to make mistakes," she says, "and to learn to trust people in their future relationships, where there won't be the same boundaries."

The key is to ensure everyone is working together and sharing information, say experts. Jonathan Stanley, manager of the National Centre for Excellence in Residential Child Care, points out that, if this is done, everyone working with a child will know their history and understand how they might respond to boundaries.

Gallagher adds that good supervision and reflective practice are also essential.

"Boundaries should not be looked on as restrictions," Gallagher says. "They are a positive tool to be worked with in a conscious and deliberate way."

*\*Not their real names*

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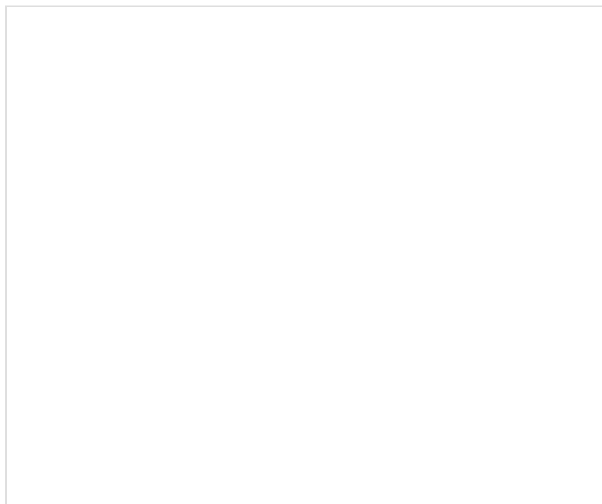
- Be positive. Learn to separate personal issues which affect your mood when working directly with a young person. Use supervision, team meetings and other support mechanisms to help with this.
- Be conscious that your moods and feelings affect communication – particularly body language and eye-contact which can affect interactions with young people.
- Be thoughtful about the language you use. Remember you are not a young person's "friend" in the way they understand it, so sensitively challenge inappropriate terms such as "mate", "pal" and "friend". Similarly, avoid using words such as "unit", in place of "home", or "service users".
- Always discuss problems with your team, rather than in front of young people, and back them up at all times. It is important to show unity and consistency.
- If a young person asks a question you are uncomfortable about answering, ask yourself why and if they need to know. Use this to divert the focus back to the "here and now" – that is, the relationship with the young person and you as their carer.
- Be careful not to collude with young people or be drawn into situations. Remain in your professional role as this ultimately offers safety to the young person.

- Respect the personal space and privacy of the young person at all times. Do not encroach on their personal boundaries, either in fun or to gain compliance.
- Make sure you are aware of the young person's background and history. This will help you to understand where their own boundaries lie and how they will respond to yours.
- Respect confidentiality. Do not discuss information about other young people or staff. Be aware of being overheard while on the phone or in other rooms.
- Young people should be discouraged from offering gifts to staff. They should know they already have professionals' positive regard and don't need to "buy" favour.
- Sharing and explaining to a young person the thoughts/thinking behind what you say builds mutual trust and respect and offers young people a new way to look at the world and their place within it.

*Source: Bryn Melyn*

*This article is published in the 19 November 2009 edition of Community Care under the headline "Boundaries – not barriers"*

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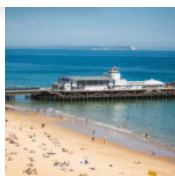


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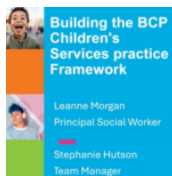


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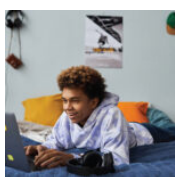


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