



How can young people on the frontiers of care contribute to evaluating the outcomes of a sustained activity programme?

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Marc Denham and John Ankers

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These reports reflect the views of the practitioners that undertook the research. The views and opinions of the authors should not be taken as representative of CWDC.

A new UK Government took office on 11 May. As a result the content in this report may not reflect current Government policy.

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### **ABSTRACT**

This research project is concerned with eliciting the views of a small selected sample of vulnerable young people who are involved in a sustained activity programme. This programme role plays an integral function within a statutory adolescent outreach support team.

A particular focus was to enable the young people to reflect and evaluate upon how and in what ways the programme may promote and contribute towards effecting positive outcomes in their personal and life situations.

A qualitative methodology is adopted, utilising in depth semi-structured, one-to-one interviews with five young people. Three respondents were male and two female. They were all aged between fifteen and seventeen.

The research provided evidence that the activity programme promotes positive outcomes, particularly in terms of contributing towards improving the personal and life situations of young people, enjoying and achieving, and providing a quasi-therapeutic peer group function. The importance of having emotional intelligent adults in their lives is also highlighted.

More broadly, the value of importance of developing effective young person-centred consultation mechanisms is suggested, along with the potential for developing a more responsive, integrated family support model, better able to serve the needs of vulnerable young people and their families.

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## **Introduction**

This practitioner-led research project is concerned with eliciting the views of a small, selected sample of vulnerable young people, with a particular focus upon their involvement in a sustained, achievement-based activity programme. This programme is a well-established and integral part of South Suffolk Children and Young People Service's Adolescent Outreach Team. This team is a statutory family support team which works on a sustained basis with young people between the ages of thirteen and eighteen. A significant number of those referred constitute complex 'in need' cases, whereby, under S17b of the 1989 Children Act, their health and development is likely to be 'significantly impaired without the provision of a service'.

The project was co-researched by the activity programme's Participation Worker and myself, the Senior Practitioner in the Adolescent Outreach Team. The Participation Worker took a more active role in the design and preparatory stages. Due to his role in running the activity programme, together with his close working relationship with the young people chosen as respondents, it was agreed that I would undertake the interviews as I am neither the allocated social worker for the young people or the line manager for any of their allocated workers.

All who participated in the activity programme have allocated social workers or family support practitioners. Referrals to the activity programme are mainly received from these allocated workers. This joined-up, co-located model of service provision enables a fluid, responsive model of intervention to prevail which is able to address these vulnerable young people's differing and changing situations and levels of need. In this sense, the configuration of service provision described pre-dates but is clearly in keeping with the 2004 Children Act's requirements to develop co-located, integrated models of service provision. Some initial and informal 'mapping' of neighbouring local authorities in East Anglia indicates that this model of service provision with respect to services for troubled adolescents is unusual and possibly unique in the region.

The activity programme provides sustained, out-of-school activities for up to forty young people throughout the year. Activities include nationally accredited courses in areas such as water sports, dance and movement, media and arts.

## **Aims of the project**

The research project aims to contribute to the ongoing evaluation of the project through the eyes of a small sample of young people, paying particular attention to their participation in the activity programme. It explores with them if, and in what ways, the programme may promote and contribute towards effecting positive changes and outcomes in their lives. More specifically, the research project considers the young people's views of:

- the role of the activity programme in terms of its impact upon their life situations, issues and difficulties
- the nature and quality of their relationships with workers involved in the activity programme and, more widely, with their allocated workers in the Adolescent Outreach Team
- the nature and quality of their relationships with the other young people involved in the activity programme
- being consulted about their participation in the activity programme and how it functions.

More broadly, the project considers the development of effective models of statutory family support for vulnerable young people and their families.

It also further considers the development of mechanisms and evaluation tools to enable young people to formally participate in shaping and evaluating the activity programme's service delivery. These broader aims are further developed in the *Implications for practice* section later in this report.

## **Context**

The work and research of Nina Biehal has provided a useful overarching context for this project. In *Home and Away* (2000) and *Working with Adolescents* (2005), she highlights both the lack of

research undertaken with regard to family support services working with 11 to 16 year olds and how specialist adolescent-focused teams have been relatively scarce in the statutory sector. Biehal considers how, since the early 1990s, these teams have been introduced and have predominantly drawn upon an intensive, short-term preventive model, with remits to prevent family breakdown and avoid the need for adolescents becoming 'looked after' in public care.

The scope of Biehal's research methodologies in these studies is impressive, utilising broad and varied qualitative and quantitative samples and methods of measurement within a quasi-experimental research approach. Semi-structured one-to-one interviews with young people are used to evaluate outcomes; gaining views about their well-being and how, and in what circumstances, positive outcomes may have taken place. Biehal concludes that there is a need to develop more holistic, integrated models of young-person focused family support services (similar conclusions are made by Brandon *et al*, 2008 & Thoburn *et al*, 2009).

Whilst there is a wealth of literature and research concerned with the benefits of and different approaches to group work within social care settings (see, for example, Douglas, 1993; Ward, 2000 ), we found the NCH briefing, *Young people, growing strong: the role of positive, structured activities* (2007), particularly relevant to this research project. This focuses on the importance of young people acquiring and developing emotional well-being, self-esteem and resilience and how these attributes fundamentally stem from the formation of positive relationships and attachments (see Howe *et al* 1999). A strong case is forwarded for a UK public-funded strategy to provide structured, extracurricular activities on a sustained basis for young people. This, with an emphasis on provision for the most vulnerable young people living in disadvantaged locations.

As the briefing states, regular weekly attendance in structured activities such as sport, drama and art enable young people:

*'to develop a moral compass by understanding how others react and understanding their feelings and needs... to understand looking ahead and planning for the future, and they also help them develop self-control.'*

Of course, to achieve positive outcomes for vulnerable young people, any intervention is only as

good as the abilities and qualities of the involved workers. The need for them to possess emotional intelligence centres upon, as Morrison (2007, p.15) puts it:

*‘ understanding and handling one’s own and others’  
emotions is a critical aspect at every stage of the social  
work task: engagement, assessment, observation,  
decision-making, planning and intervention.*

The role of young people in shaping social care planning and service delivery has become an increasing area of policy priority over the past two decades, stemming in particular from the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child 1989 and its clear position that: *‘All children should be listened to and their views taken seriously’*. If services for young people are to become fully attuned to addressing and improving outcomes, it is imperative that their views and ideas amount to more than ‘lip service’ and that a participatory framework with effective consultative mechanisms are developed. (For an overview of recent research on young people’s participation, see Social Care Institute for Excellence (SCIE), 2009.)

## **Methodology**

The process of designing and executing this research project was relatively straightforward. We agreed that a sample of six young people would be identified to be the subjects of one-to-one, semi-structured interviews. These would each last for approximately 45 minutes. A small research advisory group was to be set up, involving a parent of a young person involved in the activity group but not a respondent; along with a young person involved in the group but also not a respondent. This mechanism was introduced in order to bring a more independent, service-user-led aspect into devising the guided interview schedule. Unfortunately, due to time and planning constraints, an intended meeting ended up being a phone consultation exercise with the parent and young person. However, their ideas and input about areas to cover in the interviews did prove valuable, contributing to some amendments in the guided interview schedule.

In an attempt to ensure that the young people were able to speak freely about negative as well as positive aspects of the service, it was agreed that my co-researcher would not be involved



with the interview process. The research interviews were recorded using both audio and video equipment.

A purposive sample of six young people was identified as broadly representative of the young people attending the activity programme. Initial verbal approaches to the six potential respondents were made, followed up with written invitation/ consent letters sent to the young people and their parents; all six agreed to participate but one of the parents refused to sign consent for her daughter to take part. No reason for this refusal was given.

The final sample therefore comprised of five young people. The gender balance we had planned for in our set of criteria was not achieved. However, we were able to satisfy the following criteria:

- To conduct grounded research: the findings emerging from an analysis of one-to-one, in-depth, semi-structured interviews with five young people
- To select the young people to be presently involved in the activity programme
- To be within the average age band of young people involved in the activity programme (ie. between 14 and 17 years old)
- For the young people to represent different stages of involvement in the activity programme (i.e. from one to three years)
- For the purposive sample to be broadly representative of the ethnicity of the young people attending the activity programme (ie. White UK). However we were mindful of the wider debate relating to why relatively few ethnic minority young people are referred to the Adolescent Outreach Team
- All participants constituted, at the point of referral to the Adolescent Outreach Team, complex 'in need' cases, where there had been an identified risk of family breakdown.

The five interviews were, largely to satisfy time and logistical constraints, held on one day with a

neutral colleague from another social work team who remained present, acting as a safeguard, throughout the interviews. It had been agreed that a room in the team office building would be used to conduct the interviews. All involved felt that this setting would offer a familiar and comfortable ambience.

Although not an essential part of the research methodology, with the permission of the young people, the interviews were also video-recorded. Whilst an audio-tape would have fulfilled the purposes of the research, it was considered that the young people might consider their time even more 'well-spent' if benefit could accrue to the activities project by editing some of their comments. They were assured that this footage will only be used with their explicit consent and for an agreed purpose.

In terms of evaluating the strengths and weaknesses of the methodology, it should be stressed that this research has manifestly not attempted to be experimental or quasi-experimental, with the researcher in the role of a dispassionate observer of phenomena, gathering and presenting scientifically rigorous evidence. Rather, it is a modest, small-scale, qualitative piece of research.

The methodology itself enabled a positive rapport to develop; the interviews providing a straightforward and practical means of gathering qualitative data. The informal nature of the interviews was effective given what is known about young people's particular dislike of, and unease when faced with, formal situations, settings and procedures. Using open-ended questions and a guided interview schedule rather than a structured questionnaire enabled them to speak in a relatively unconstrained, self-directed manner, thereby promoting a depth and richness to their responses. A fluid and at times complex dialogue developed around the areas already listed in the *Aims of the project* section.

The project's single group design, with no comparison group, meant that the findings are conditional and tentative. A further limitation, when analysing the findings, is that, as active participants in the activity programme, and having agreed to be interviewed, they are obviously motivated and therefore more disposed to give views and insights which create a picture of positive change and outcome. These limitations are important to consider, particularly when one factors in their vulnerability.

Additionally, the broader context of the young people's life situations and the many and varied

influences of other intervening variables would need to be factored in for a clearer understanding and evaluation of change and outcome to be arrived at.

## **Findings**

### ***Profiles of the five young people (please note names and some details have been changed to preserve anonymity)***

#### **Danielle**

Danielle is fifteen and comes from a family with an entrenched, dysfunctional history, including generational intra-familial sexual abuse. She was subjected to parental domestic violence and an acrimonious separation as a young child. Danielle presents with emotional and behavioural difficulties which manifest in multiple ways (eg. volatile outbursts, problematic peer relationships, self-harm, sexual health and associated risk-taking behaviour). She has been participating in the activity programme for almost three years. Danielle's mother was recently diagnosed with a terminal illness

#### **Polly**

Polly is fifteen and was first referred to the department by the Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS). She has received a service from CAMHS since she was six and diagnosed with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) and put on medication. Concerns have focused on Polly being beyond parental control, with serious oppositional behaviours, manifesting at home and school. Her parents separated when she was young. Polly has been participating in the activity programme for the past year.

#### **Adam**

Adam is fifteen and was first referred to the department by CAMHS. At the time he was presenting with a range of social communication and language difficulties and has subsequently been diagnosed with atypical autism. Particular concern has focused upon his challenging,

confrontational behaviours at home, which his parents have struggled to cope with. Adam has been participating in the activity programme for nearly two years.

### **Jamie**

Jamie is fifteen and was first referred to the department due to concerns that he and his siblings were at risk of suffering emotional and physical harm due to chronic parental domestic violence, perpetrated by their father and linked to his alcohol misuse. Parents separated and Jamie has remained living with his mother, having little subsequent contact with his father. Concerns have also focused upon his mother's capacity to think and act protectively with respect to a male partner who was a Schedule 1 offender. Jamie has been participating in the activity programme for the past eighteen months.

### **Ethan**

Ethan is seventeen. He is the second youngest of nine children and different social services departments have been involved with him and his family throughout his life. This was due to entrenched and chronic dysfunction which has encompassed concerns covering all forms of abuse. Since the age of nine, he has had a more stable and protective arrangement in the care of relatives. Alcohol misuse and low self-esteem has been previously highlighted as concerns. He has participated in the activity programme for the past three years.

### **Findings**

**Through our open ended questions the themes that emerged from the analysis of the transcribed interviews fitted mainly within the 'Enjoy and achieve' *Every Child Matters* dimension. However, unsurprisingly given their experience before joining and during their involvement, issues arose around feeling safe, and relationships with peers, parents, relatives and professionals.**

### **Enjoying and achieving**

Perhaps most fundamentally, and in keeping with a key outcome of the government's *Every Child Matters* policy, the young people all highlighted how much they have enjoyed, achieved and experienced through their participation in the activity programme:

*I'll always remember when I went to North Yorkshire. I was only about 12 or 13. That was when I first started. I'll always remember we went in these caves underground and I conquered my massive fear...I'm scared of small places and we were underground and had to go through this really tiny tunnel and I got stuck in the middle of it and I had to push my way through. I was crying and screaming but I done it and I was proud of myself for that. It just make you feel good that you've done something.*

*(Danielle)*

*I enjoyed learning how to park the powerboat, learning how to do 'man overboard', learning how to windsurf. The bike ride we went on was enjoyable because we were allowed to just relax and enjoy ourselves.*

*(Polly)*

### **Life situations, issues and difficulties**

To differing degrees, the young people linked their participation in the activity programme to improvements and developments in their life situations, and to issues and difficulties affecting them:

*"Since I've been on the activity groups I've calmed down a bit at home. I'm not so argumentative; not so defiant."*

*(Polly)*

*"I think I would have been a bit worse than I am now because I hardly got any help before. But since I've joined the group I've*

*been good and stuff...I behave better at home because when I was younger, I used to be smashing windows and stuff so that's really helped me at home."*

(Jamie)

*"To be honest, I would have been kicked out of school, been at home; maybe drinkin'. Don't know, but I would have been a bum, wouldn't have worked, wouldn't have gone out...well only to get into trouble. I can definitely say that."*

(Ethan)

*"Probably if I didn't come I'd probably still be at home or going out, messing about, getting caught by the police and that. I would probably be really bad at school and I wouldn't have as many friends like from the groups and that."*

(Adam)

Danielle provided a particularly thoughtful and insightful response; linking her participation in the activity programme not to helping her address her own issues and difficulties, but more in terms of developing and broadening her outlook and attitude towards other people:

*"I don't think, 'oh it's changed my life', but I've done a lot of things that I wouldn't have done. I've had lots of opportunities to do different things; weird and crazy things I never thought it possible to do. I suppose it has kind of changed me in the fact that I'm more accepting of people."*

### **Peer relationships and dynamics**

A clear finding has been how the young people's participation in the activity programme has facilitated an informal group/ peer support function to emerge and develop. The sustained nature of the programme is pivotal in terms of this function, particularly in terms of giving young

people time to develop an understanding of commonalities in their life situations and to build mutually trusting relationships. This quasi-therapeutic function is illustrated by the following quotations:

*'If you really got it on your chest you can say it without getting angry with them. They'd be like, "I've had this happen" and you can go, "yeah, I had this happen to me so I don't really know what to do." And then they advise you or you advise them. So they're basically good people to talk to. I know they are like me, only young people, but we can talk about stuff.'*

(Ethan)

*'You can relate to some people can't you. They've got similar problems or they've been through things. It's good to mix with people who have so-called problems as well, but it's nice to speak to people who haven't.'*

(Danielle)

However, it would be wrong to paint a cosy, non-conflictual picture of peer relationships within the activity programme. Polly honestly discussed how she has physically attacked another young woman who had been staring at her:

*'...she has got problems, the same as all of us. I think she was just looking at us because she felt left out. I think that's what she told either X or Y (social workers involved in the summer programme); that she was being left out and she was looking at us to try and make friends...now I just regret what I done.'*

A therapeutic dimension comes to light here, with Polly able to reflect positively upon her behaviour and start to think about the other young person in a more understanding, empathetic way. The role of emotionally intelligent staff in this process is also highlighted.

**Views on relationships with project staff and outreach team social workers.**

All the young people acknowledged the positive role of their allocated Adolescent Outreach Social Workers in introducing and explaining the referral process and value of the activity programme to them and their families.

*“She came to the family home and explained that they do activities and that I’d really enjoy it if I was to come onto it. She talked to my mum about it.”*

(Polly)

The importance of and quality of the young people’s relationships with the activity programme staff were highlighted as follows.

*‘They’re kind and helpful and I get along with them, like X, he’s a good bloke. We have a laugh and a joke sometimes. That’s helped me cos at first I was all shy but I’m sort of getting my confidence and stuff, so it’s helping me with that.’*

(Jamie)

*‘....its like the workers they sort of bring it out, not in a bad way, they say “I’m here for you,” that’s really good. Like you’re having an activity like bowling and X was there and he said, “hey Ethan, you look a bit pee’d off mate.” I was like “yeah, it’s everyday life at school”, and he was like, “yeah I know what it was like at school, I was there, I’ve been there and done that.” It’s good how some of our workers have been in our situation and they can give their opinions, sort of thing.’*

(Ethan)

There were some interesting comments made by the young people in terms of the flexibility and availability of staff support across the social work and activity programme staff functions:



*'If I've got a problem and I need to talk to someone I phone up and see if X (allocated social worker) is in, if she is I'll just talk about my problems with her and she'll try and calm me down over the phone. But if X isn't in then I talk to Y (participation worker on activity programme) and he just do the same, trying to calm me down over the phone, but if none of them are in I just ask for them to ring me back.'*

(Polly)

One of the young female people had a more equivocal and complex viewpoint having earlier in the interview been quite dismissive of social workers referring to them as being "interfering". She then went on to ponder the value of having a social worker:

*'I'm confused in that way because when I stopped having a social worker things have gone downhill in my life since then. Whether it's because I don't have a social worker or what, I don't know. But now I feel I could do with that help again.'*

In the following quotation, she focuses upon adults who have been helpful and important in supporting her. She powerfully contrasts her views of her allocated social worker with a teacher:

*'I am very picky with people and it does need to be the right person. You can't just be plonked with someone...you need to get on with them, but I don't think I got on with her (allocated social worker) from the start. I spoke to her nicely you know, but I don't think I had that connection with her. I think it's also the trust because with this teacher I speak to, if I say I need to tell you something she will say to me "if I feel it's necessary I will need to pass it on", and so I will tell her if I don't want to or I will because then I'll know, but my social worker didn't do that. It was like she'd put words in my mouth and lead me on to say things I didn't want to say so I don't think I like that.'*

Adam and Ethan also mentioned particular teachers at their respective schools as having been available and supportive to them when they were having difficulties. In terms of family-based sources of adult support, only Adam referred to it, in the form of his mum and grandparents.

These findings fundamentally draw out the fact that whoever the adult source of help and support for young people is, they have to possess intuitive and empathetic skills which are fundamental qualities in what has commonly become referred to as emotional intelligence.

## **Being consulted**

The young people all advised of having had considerable informal discussions with activity programme Staff regarding their views. The following exchange in the interview between Adam and I exemplify this:

MD : “Have you ever been asked about having a say in how the programme is run and what activities are on offer?”

Adam : “I’ve been asked what activities I’d like to do and that, but apart from that...”

MD : “And how did that happen, how were you asked? Were you asked to write anything down?”

Adam : “No, it was just like general... just talking like, “what would you like to do” and that.”

MD : “Was that on your own or in a group?”

Adam : Like a group. In a car going somewhere and X (one of the workers) just said.”

Danielle, having discussed the formal way in which she has previously been asked for her views of the programme, made the following comment in response to being asked whether she would like to have more say:

*‘Yes I do think so. We haven’t got to be asked constantly, but if you are asked once it starts after the summer. If you were asked then or given a couple of choices like what kind of things do you want to do, then that would be OK. Because you don’t get your own way all the time... .good to have some kind of say in it definitely.’*

More formal attempts to gather the young people's views of the activity programme have included questionnaires. However Ethan's response sums up the difficulties typically associated with this method of information gathering.

*'[I] had one come through but I forgot to do it. I read it but I forgot to hand it in to John (participation worker). It asked me "have I enjoyed the group?". Yes. What have been the ups and downs of the group? What can improve? What can help? What do you want to do and stuff like that.'*

### **Implications of the views expressed for future practice**

The young people's comments indicate that the activity programme would benefit from developing more effective and sustainable formal mechanisms to enable their views to be better heard and to actively shape its functioning. There are resource-drive barriers which have thwarted this area of service development. Perhaps utilising a Children's Rights and Participation Worker would be a way forward here.

To this effect consideration is presently already being given to the implementation of a dedicated protected website being established, along with a joint working council comprising of selected young people and staff.

It is hoped that these developments will be the catalyst for further initiatives such as developing peer-led research and consultation projects. These would provide a less mediated 'take' on what young people think about and want from the activity programme.

More broadly, this project has led to considering the implications for future practice in terms of how the Adolescent Outreach Team could continue to form the hub of a co-located, integrated model of statutory support for vulnerable young people and their families.

With regard to the intensive, short-term preventive models of intervention researched by Biehal, Suffolk has, over the past couple of years, introduced a similar model providing a twelve week intervention where there is an acute risk of family breakdown. This method of intervention was found by Biehal (2000) to have met the needs of some young people and their families, often

when situations had reached crisis point. However, when it came to more entrenched, fundamental difficulties, the need for sustained interventions to address the underlying difficulties became evident.

There is evidence from the views expressed by the young people interviewed for this project to support a proposal to incorporate this intensive, short-term model within the sustained function of the Adolescent Outreach Team. This would enable the continued development of a seamless and responsive model of service provision to some of Suffolk's most vulnerable young people and their families.

## **Conclusion**

The five young people interviewed for this study each had histories and present circumstances that made them vulnerable to future harm if not appropriately helped. They have provided evidence that the activity programme is highly valued by them and considered to have had a positive impact on their lives. Their responses indicate that this is likely to be the case for most of the vulnerable young people who decide to come on the programme, although a larger study with more objective baselines and outcome measures would be needed to confirm this conclusion. This is particularly the case in terms of them enjoying and achieving, and in contributing towards improving their difficult life experiences and situations.

Crucial in enabling these outcomes is the sustained nature of the activity programme and its provision alongside the social work function of the Adolescent Outreach Team. This is an important message since many of the interventions for troubled adolescents described in the research literature (see Biehal's research and research overview) are of a time-limited nature. The value of intensive, short-term social work and protective intervention in acute situations is recognised, and incorporating this remit within an integrated Adolescent Outreach Team model could provide a more seamless, responsive service to vulnerable young people and their families.

In addition to thinking about models of service provision, the importance of young people having emotionally intelligent adults in their lives (over a sustained period when appropriate), be they professionals or family members, was an important theme which emerged from the interviews.

The study also highlights the value of semi-structured interviews as an evaluation tool and the need to develop effective consultation mechanisms to continue to listen to and gather young people's views routinely as part of the service which can shape future service delivery. These developments could provide creative avenues for further research being undertaken which could build on the findings of this study.

Being practitioner-researchers has enabled us to benefit from an 'insider' perspective, in particular being able to access the voices and views of young people with relative ease. Undertaking the research has provided us with an invaluable opportunity to reflect on what we are actually doing and trying to achieve in our work. These fundamental aspects can all too easily become lost in our frenetic work schedules.

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