



Department  
for Education

# **Behaviour Management and Reducing Offending by Children Placed in Children's Homes**

**Executive Summary**

**July 2013**

# Contents

Executive summary	3
Key Findings	4
Recruitment, Induction and Training of Staff	4
Leadership	4
Understanding and Knowing Needs of Children and Young People	4
Behaviour Management and Conflict Resolution	5
Assaults on Staff	5
Police Involvement	5
Partnership Working	6
Conclusions	7
Recommendations	8

## Executive summary

This executive summary sets out the findings from the Department for Education commissioned initiative, Behaviour Management and Reducing Offending by Children Placed in Children's Homes. The initiative was commissioned as a contribution to the Department's Support and Improvement Programme for the children's home sector which ran from 2010-2012.

The aim of this work was to understand the mechanisms which could lead to children being prosecuted for behaviour within homes, where they would not have been charged with an offence if it had taken place within a family setting. The initiative investigated examples of good practice in children's homes and partner agencies in dealing with behavioural challenge without unnecessary criminalisation

The Behaviour Management and Reducing Offending by Children Placed in Children's Homes Initiative comprised the following three elements:

- A research planning workshop to seek the views of practitioners, working in children's homes and wider agencies to design the criteria for the initiative.
- An on-line questionnaire for children's home managers and partner agencies (completed by 21 respondents).
- Four in-depth site visits to children's homes involving detailed discussions with staff, young people and children.

The majority of looked after children placed in children's homes will have experienced abuse and neglect. Sometimes they demonstrate disruptive or challenging behaviour within the home which can lead to unnecessary criminalisation, particularly if the police are called to help manage the disruption. Involvement in the criminal justice system can further add to the disadvantages faced by this group of looked after children and have a profound effect on their future life chances.

This research focused on identifying good practice and understanding why it was effective. It identified key characteristics within a residential setting which contributed to successfully managing behaviour and reducing the risk of criminalisation.

## Key Findings

Homes with good quality, child-centred practice, a commitment to the parenting role, and a clear mission to provide the best outcomes for children avoided unnecessary criminalisation of the children in their care.

Staff in these homes were well trained and supported and the young people had access to education, health and psychological support services where required.

## Recruitment, Induction and Training of Staff

Investment in staff, beginning at the recruitment stage, is necessary to support staff to develop, grow and be effective. All staff must be offered access to regular supervision that provides them with the opportunity to reflect on their practice, in order to develop confidence and skills.

Training in behaviour management and, if appropriate, the safe application of physical intervention, gave staff confidence in safely managing complex behaviours. Training offered staff opportunities to understand and react to challenging behaviour triggers.

Training in verbal conflict management, defusion<sup>1</sup> and de-escalation techniques were recognised by the staff involved to be particularly valuable. If applied correctly, these techniques can significantly reduce the need for physical intervention. Staff reported greater confidence in being able to spot potential causes of conflict early and better awareness of how to de-escalate possible incidents.

## Leadership

Homes with good practice in encouraging children to develop positive socially aware behaviour displayed strong visible leadership. Good homes have Managers who have clarity of vision about the homes objectives combined with an absolute commitment and focus on the needs of the child.

## Understanding and Knowing Needs of Children and Young People

Domestic routines in children's homes should be used to engage children. Effective staff members continually involve children and young people in activities within the home, using the time with them to discuss problems and issues – gaining an appreciation for their hopes and future goals as well as understanding current frustrations. This level of care provided an insight into possible triggers which might lead to future disruptive behaviour.

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<sup>1</sup> "Defusion" techniques are verbal and non-verbal methods of communication designed to manage aggressive behaviour while ensuring personal safety.

Good staff ratios were important and staff were encouraged to spend minimal time in the office away from contact with young people.

## **Behaviour Management and Conflict Resolution**

Constructive engagement with children encourages an open and respectful culture within children's homes, where it is safe and acceptable to challenge inappropriate behaviour. Good practice relies on consistency of expectation, addressing the consequences of inappropriate behaviour and constant positive reinforcement of unwanted behaviours. Sanctions employed by homes were understood by the children concerned and were proportionate to the misbehaviour.

## **Assaults on Staff**

In cases where an assault on a staff member occurred, homes had a clear policy that staff have the option to report the incident to the police. Staff are aware of the impact police involvement could have on the child concerned and the potential for criminalisation. This awareness though, did not interfere with staff having the choice of deciding to report the incident to the police.

Immediate support is provided to both the staff member and the young person. Debriefing of staff normally takes place after the incident, allowing sufficient time for recovery, ensuring that the member of staff concerned is relaxed and able to consider issues more objectively. Good practice entails that every incident is recorded and analysed in team meetings, and processes established to make sure that the incident is not repeated or its impact reduced

The homes involved in this initiative put in place practices to ensure everyone's voice could be heard following any violent incident and that any assault is taken seriously and responded to appropriately. Elements of restorative justice, including reparation, were part of the working practice of most homes. This includes agreements about reparation and respect for other's property. However, structured formal restorative justice approaches tended not to be formally used in the units involved with this study.

## **Police Involvement**

Calling the police for assistance in responding to incidents in children's homes is normally dependent on:

- the severity of the incident
- the severity of previous incidents involving the particular child;
- the cumulative effect of a number of previous incidents involving a child;

- consultation with a home's management, including "on-call" management;
- any assessment of the risk to the child concerned, to the other children in the home, and to staff; and
- managers and staff being generally aware of the potential impact on the young person's criminal career if charged with an offence, linked to a call to the police for assistance.

All the homes surveyed had protocols in place to call for police intervention. Those with good working relationship with their local police force often invited community police officers into the home to discuss low level incidents. In some homes this practice reduced the number of incidents which police were called to formally respond to.

## **Partnership Working**

The role of partner agencies, including local authority social workers, Independent Reviewing Officers and Youth Offending Teams was vital in reducing the risk of criminalisation of children. These agencies also have a role in preventing reoffending if young people had previously been convicted.

Reducing unnecessary criminalisation is an important aspect of effective corporate parenting. Local authorities must have a clear corporate parenting vision championed by elected members, officers and partner agencies all committed to reducing the needless criminalisation of children in care. This is part of a programme of promoting positive outcomes, so looked after children have aspirations, opportunities to succeed and reach their potential. Involvement in offending by looked after children should form part of annual reports on corporate parenting in every local authority.

## Conclusions

The project focused on examining good practice in children's homes and community agencies. It gathered a great deal of evidence from staff and managers in children's homes, both in the local authority and independent sectors. It has also gained the perspective of managers and staff in partner organisations who contribute to the overall system affecting outcomes for looked after young people.

The firm conclusion of this work was that whilst there are examples excellent practice and a framework in which agencies can work together for improved outcomes, the level of collaboration necessary does not happen consistently. Whilst, in well-managed children's homes, child-centred practice helped minimise challenging behaviour and prevent incidents escalating, partnership working to encourage young people to develop positive behaviour and avoid needless criminalisation could be greatly improved. National Minimum Standards, Regulations and Statutory Guidance, particularly the Care Planning Guidance 2010<sup>2</sup>, describe the framework for good practice

The status of children's homes' care was a fundamental issue underlying the findings of this initiative. Local authorities tended to only make placements in children's homes as a "last resort" after young people had already experienced foster care disruptions. Plans for individual children were often based on working to minimise the length of placements despite evidence that a stable consistent care experience, where young people only move-on following careful preparation, has the potential to achieve the best outcomes.

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.education.gov.uk/childrenandyoungpeople/families/childrenincare/a0065502/care-planning-for-looked-after-children-and-care-leavers>

# Recommendations

## 1 Local authorities should:

- 1.1 Have a clear corporate parenting vision championed by elected members, officers and partner agencies setting out their commitment to reduce the risk of children being criminalised in residential settings.
- 1.2 Develop multi-agency protocols to reduce offending.
- 1.3 Ensure that the Independent Reviewing Officers (IRO) use reviews on how the homes approach to behaviour management affects outcomes for individual young people.
- 1.4 Require IROs to report annually on current practice and progress toward improved outcomes.

## 2 OFSTED when inspecting children's homes should:

- 2.1 Assess the quality of support and direct work with children and young people and its impact on their behaviour, including reducing the incidence of challenging or criminal behaviour.
- 2.2 When inspecting local authority services for looked after children should address how the local authority, with its partners, meets the needs of looked after children and young people, including minimising the potential for unnecessary criminalisation.

## 3 The Department for Education should:

- 3.1 Work toward raising the status of children's residential care services, enhance training and professionalism, and consider promoting the social pedagogue approach.





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