

Social pedagogy in practice: Building stronger relationships in the team around the child

This resource introduces you to Sarah and Joyce, a foster carer and a supervising social worker respectively who share their experiences of how exploring social pedagogy together has helped them to improve their relationship and strengthen other relationships in the team around the child. They have also suggested a reflection exercise that you might want to try at home that will help you incorporate some social pedagogic thinking in your own practice.

Social pedagogy and the team around the child

Within fostering the 'team around the child' is the term used to refer to the multi-disciplinary team of professionals, including the foster carers, who support the child or young person. All these people influence the way the child is supported and have an impact on how the child experiences care. They have to operate within the policies, procedures and cultural norms of their services; and the way they work together and the quality of their relationships can have a big impact on the life of the child or young person they are supporting – not to mention, the impact that these relationships can have on your life as a foster carer!

Relationships are a core focus for social pedagogy, and are recognised as the foundation for growth and learning for children and adults alike. So when adopting a social pedagogic approach to foster care, it is particularly important to look at the relationships not just between foster carers and the children they look after, but also between the various members of the team around the child. It can be very helpful if different members of the team share a professional language and share social pedagogic values such as equality, empowerment, holistic focus, and the importance of critically reflective practice.

Sarah and Joyce's story: working together in the team around the child

Sarah has been a foster carer for many years now. She took part in Head, Heart, Hands social pedagogy training and has been a big promoter of social pedagogy within her service. Alongside Sarah, her supervising social worker, Joyce, also took part in the same social pedagogy course. They enjoyed learning together, which helped them build a stronger relationship with each other as they became familiar with the theory, concepts and tools of social pedagogy and explored together how to apply what they learned on the course in their practice.

Sarah and Joyce both feel passionately that it is important to have a strong, effective team around the child which works together, agrees on shared aims, objectives and ways of working. In her experience, Sarah says that a strong team can really help the foster carer's resilience, which in turn improves placement stability. 'If you don't have that open communication and strength and resilience within the team, with everybody working together, it will break down.'

Louise, now 13, had numerous placements before coming to live with Sarah and John, all of which had broken down. Sarah feels that knowing Louise is seen and heard by a number of different people who communicate well together is essential for her development: 'It's really important that the team works together from the start and agrees what's best for the child'. Joyce agrees, 'A lot of what goes on for the child, happens at home or in the classroom and the social worker and others won't see it. So a really vital task for the people in the team around the child is sharing information. It's also important to support foster carers, who really do know the child well and should be respected for that knowledge.' Sarah adds, 'It's about trust really, if you want us to look after this child, then trust our judgement.'

And it's not just respect for the foster carer, there needs to be empathy and respect between all of the professionals in the team. Joyce thinks that social pedagogy has helped them reflect more deeply on these relationships and how to build them effectively. 'It's important how you make things happen in the team, how you build the relationships, and how you get people on board, and get everyone in the team respecting

each other.’ But Joyce acknowledges that it’s not always easy, ‘That can be really hard to do with someone who is very busy, or with someone who doesn’t see the relationship with the foster carer as being key.’

Building a strong team around the child

A strong team is built on strong, warm empathic relationships between all involved. Before Sarah and John had Louise in their family, they looked after a young man called Stephen, who was 13 when he arrived with them, and had a history of adoptive breakdown and living in residential care over his time being looked after. Sarah and John could see the potential in Stephen and they were equally aware of his need to overcome his severe attachment disorder from his difficult start in life. Stephen stayed with them for nearly three years, and was with them when Sarah started the Head, Heart, Hands social pedagogy course. Through strong working together in the team around him, a decision was made for Stephen to move to a therapeutic residential placement, and he now lives independently and visits Sarah and John most weekends meaning that they can continue to provide guidance and remain a positive relationship in his life.

When asked to reflect on what supported effective working in the team around Stephen, Sarah shares, ‘You need an inclusive set-up’. Joyce agrees, ‘You need an initial meeting to set the boundaries, parameters and confidentiality agreements that enable the important information to be shared.’

Respect is important in social pedagogy, as it helps engender a spirit of equality: a mutual acknowledgement that people – adults *and* children – have different roles but equal value. As Sarah says, ‘Foster carers need to be respected and empowered as the one who is with the child 24/7.’

Sarah recalls that inspiring a sense of cooperation and respect was particularly well role-modelled by Stephen’s therapist. ‘She was very clear with us and with Stephen about what she would share and what not. At the end of each session with Stephen she would take ten minutes to share what they had discussed – this was agreed with Stephen.’ Joyce agrees, ‘She also helped us look after ourselves, and she always had aromatherapy oil burning, coffee on and lovely cushions out for us.’ Small but thoughtful gestures like these can really support positive relationships in the team around the child and add to the sense of togetherness and community.

Within this team spirit of cooperation, Sarah says she feels that the foster carer needs to have the courage to stand up for what they believe is right, but they also have a responsibility to reflect carefully on the best way to go about this: ‘What made a big difference for me from social pedagogy, was how foster carers can feel really empowered to challenge what other professionals are saying in a constructive way. Good communication, thinking through what you are going to say, how you are going to say it and how to make sure it’s heard in the right way, and maybe even talking it through in advance with your supervising social worker. It made foster carers think how you could become more empowered in the care of the child and how you got on board with the social workers.’

From her own experience of exploring social pedagogy, Joyce shares that, ‘The social pedagogic concept of shared life-space really supports the fostering family as a normal loving family.’ For Joyce, it is this central family environment which the team around the child needs to come together to support.

Sarah certainly feels that social pedagogy has changed the relationship between her and Joyce. ‘I think we always had a good relationship, but I think it’s deepened and strengthened. We share a language and it is a more equal relationship now.’

Once Stephen had successfully settled in his residential placement, Sarah and Joyce took their learning from Head, Heart, Hands, and their newly strengthened relationship, and directed their energies into supporting Louise to have the best possible start with Sarah and John. They quickly realised she was finding it hard to move beyond the feelings and experiences of her early life. ‘She couldn’t get on because she was stuck,’ Sarah recalls. ‘We felt she was stuck in a loop, repeating the same patterns, and there seemed to be an

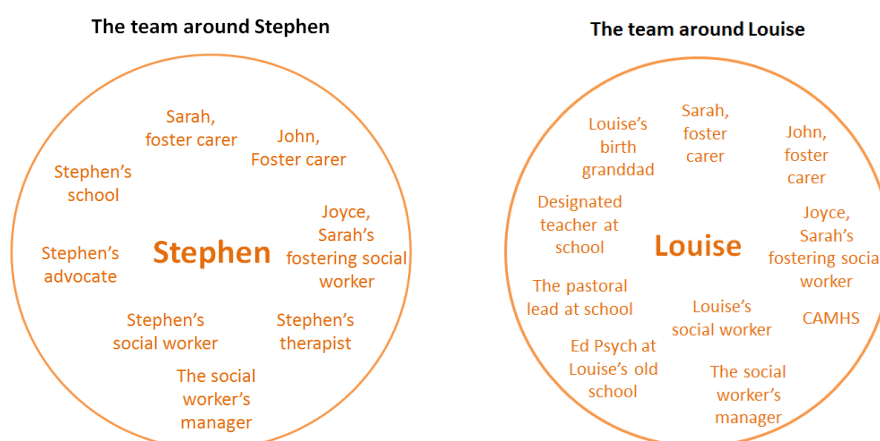
inability to break out of that. I use the analogy of the hamster wheel, going round and round but actually going nowhere.’ Louise was struggling with oppositional defiance disorder and was running away, hoarding, stealing, and self-harming. ‘This is all in protest – all of those are symptoms of a young person who is completely stuck emotionally. And we somehow as a team have to help move her into a different space,’ says Sarah.

Sarah and Joyce felt that an inclusive set-up was particularly important in the case of the team around Louise, and they particularly wanted to build their relationship with Louise’s social worker, Alice. They discussed various options and decided there would be huge value in the five of them – Louise, Sarah, John, Joyce and Alice, all spending some time together so they could build their relationships and discuss, reflect and plan together as a team. They spent the afternoon together in the family home, working on a life-story activity with Louise. Helping her to describe and reflect on her story, her gifts and strengths, her dreams, her nightmares and what she thought she might need, from herself and from those around her, to help her achieve her dreams and avoid her nightmares. Louise felt very much in the driving seat and did a lot of the drawing and writing – she was fully engaged in the process, and Sarah was very pleased that Louise was able to articulate so much about herself and to have her social worker present for an extended period of time.

As a result of working together in a social pedagogic way, Sarah and Joyce feel that Alice has a much better understanding of Louise, ‘Alice said she really enjoyed the afternoon and got a lot from it. It gave her a better insight into Louise and more information than she would get from an hour on her own with Louise.’ They also feel the activity helped to strengthen the team relationships. The sense of shared understanding has helped to create a positive team spirit. Everyone shares and understands Louise’s dream, and is ready to work with her to help her move towards it.

Mapping the team around the child

Sarah and John both felt it was vital to really understand who else made up the teams around Stephen and Louise. They spent time identifying the different professionals who would be working with Stephen and Louise and then reflected on ways to strengthen those relationships and build a team approach. The maps below set out the various people who would play an important part in supporting the two teenagers, and highlights just how complex that network can feel for young people.

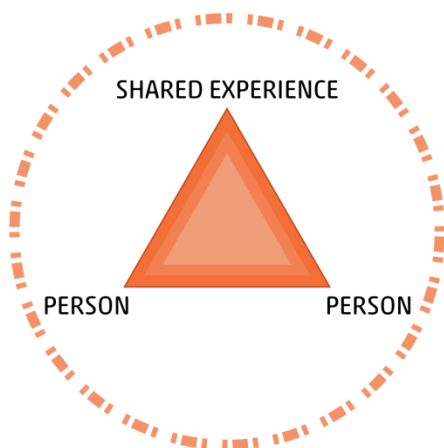


Reflection exercise – try this at home

Spend some time, either in personal reflection, or as a family, thinking about the other people in the team around the young person in your care. Perhaps even map them out as Sarah and John have done for Stephen and Louise, identifying the different people and how they inter-relate. You could work creatively using colour, drawings and photos. Reflect together on the diagram. Have a think about the relationships that exist within this team. Are there some that can be strengthened? How might you be able to do that? How might you improve understanding and information sharing across the team?

Using the Common Third to strengthen relationships

Sarah and Joyce recommend that foster carers might like to try out a Common Third (Lihme, 1988) exercise to help build relationships. The Common Third is one of the social pedagogic concepts and tools that has really stood out for Head, Heart, Hands foster carers and social workers as central to people's experience of social pedagogy and something that has made a big difference in their everyday practice. It can be applied in developing a relationship with a child or young person, and equally with another adult.



The Common Third relates to a task or activity that is common to the two individuals and that is chosen as a result of thinking carefully about how to support personal development through their relationship. It can be as simple as doing the washing up together, or more complex in helping people to express themselves through a creative activity. Common Third activities are often at their most powerful when both individuals are learning a new skill together.

The concept can be used to support relationship building between a foster carer and child or young person, as well as between a foster carer and their supervising social worker or other professionals. It builds on existing skills and interests and develops new ones to incorporate in the carer's practice and the child or young person's life.

Sarah relates how early in her relationship with Joyce they had an Italian cooking day together, with Stephen, and while they were cooking everyone shared what they valued in each other: a simple thing, but a good way to deepen relationships. Joyce says she would never have thought of spending almost a whole day with a foster carer and foster child before social pedagogy, and Sarah feels it helped Joyce understand the true interactions between her and her foster child, rather than relying on what she told her. They both think that getting the different people in the team around the child involved in a common third like this cooking day would be really helpful to team relationships.

Reflection exercise – try this at home

Sarah and Joyce suggest that you could, in your own foster family, think with your foster child about what common third activity you might employ to build relationships within your team around your child, and involve your child in the planning. For example you could have a meeting while having a picnic in a local park, or work together to create a piece of artwork based on something everyone enjoys, or work on creating together a window box or small flower bed. The possibilities are endless – what might excite the child and the adults?

'Be purposeful and think about it in advance,' suggests Joyce, 'then, after you have done the activity, you can all sit round and as the foster carer you can do a little reflection and ask everybody how they found it, what they think they might have got out of it.'

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