

Social pedagogy in practice: Education and achievement

In this resource we meet foster carer Linda who shares with us some of her experiences of how social pedagogy and the Head, Heart, Hands programme which have helped her to support her two foster sons in education and achievement.

Education and achievement

Before we explore two of the models from social pedagogy that Linda has found particularly helpful, it is important to first understand what *'education and achievement'* really mean for her and her family. It's a term used a lot – but actually stopping to think about what it means for you and the children you care for is a useful reflection exercise, and something that Linda and her family have put a great deal of thought into.

For Linda, achievement should not be limited to formal education: 'It's not just academic results. Those are important and we believe education is key, but real success in our household is measured by how hard you have tried.' And it's far broader for Linda than just results in the classroom. 'Achievement is whether or not the boys become young people and adults who can function independently in society – and are happy. The children need to be happy, but they also need to learn how to be kind, how to accept kindness, how to give kindness and be recognised as being kind. Kindness is a huge achievement.'

Linda also thought about how 'achievement' might be defined for the boys: 'For them, it's having a birthday party that people come to.' In Linda's experience, this measure of success is very real and vitally important. 'Our eldest experienced inviting people to his party and having nobody come. It was incredibly painful for him – and for all of us. From that point on we knew we had to work hard on his ability to recognise the good in him – and also show it to other people. So we worked really hard with him on relationships. We knew he was focused on maths and wanted eventually to go to university to do a maths degree, but we said to him, "It can't just be about what grade you get. To get the most out of university, and life, you need to be able to make friends. And to do that, we need to work with you on how you interact with people, how you make friends, and how you keep friends."'

It has been the same for both boys, and the hard work they have all put in has been paying off. 'One measure of success for me is a card that my littlest lad got from a girl in his class on his most recent birthday. She wrote, "*You are such a nice person. I like you as a friend because you're always friendly and I can talk to you.*" And I just thought WOW! If you knew where this little boy came from, that four years ago he had no voice and no friends, and no idea how to make friends - the journey he has made is fundamental. That's a huge success - a massive achievement. And that's all down to what he is able to do for himself.'

When Linda reflects on the role of the foster carer in supporting children in education and achievement she says, 'We cannot make them succeed, but we can provide them with what they need to make success possible. We can give them a home and an environment that will help them to achieve their best. For children and young people to really achieve, they need to feel proud of themselves. We can keep reminding them every day of how brilliant they are.'

Reflection exercise – try this at home

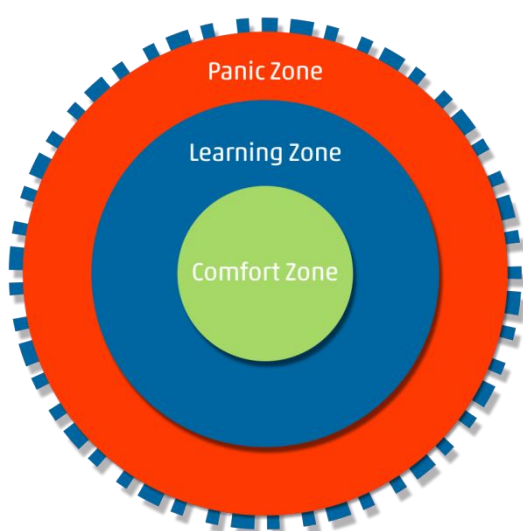
What does 'education and achievement' mean for you and your family?

Spend some time, either in personal reflection, or perhaps together as a family, thinking about how you would define achievement for you and the children and young people in your care. How do you recognise and celebrate it?

The Learning Zone model

The first model Linda felt helped her family is called the Learning Zone Model (Senninger, 2000).

The Learning Zone model suggests that three zones are in play during any situation:



The comfort zone, where things are familiar and where we don't have to take any risks. We feel safe in this zone – but can learn very little here. We must choose to leave it to stretch ourselves and learn new skills and develop new confidences.

The learning zone, where we choose to enter situations that are perhaps less familiar, where we choose to challenge ourselves and take risks. This can be a rich and exciting place where meaningful learning can take place and new skills and confidences develop.

The panic zone, where we are unable to learn much or indeed anything, often as a result of being pushed into a situation we didn't choose to enter. In this zone you feel unable to cope with the new risks and challenges you are experiencing.

Developing an understanding of this model helps practitioners to create positive learning situations and avoid situations that can cause anxiety. It also helps the individual to better understand their own behaviours and reactions, as well as giving them a framework that can help them step into the shoes of others and recognise and understand different people's reactions to different situations and environments.

Linda and the Learning Zone

'This was possibly the most important model for the boys. For them, having an understanding of the panic, learning and comfort zones, and recognising how they react when they are in each zone, has been really important. For many looked after children, their reaction to coming under stress is to run, metaphorically or physically (and often, particularly for our eldest, both at the same time!). The Learning Zone Model gave the boys something they could pin their emotions and reactions to. It helped them to understand what they were feeling and why this affected their behaviour. We saw that when they boys started to learn which zone they were in, they were also able to learn that it was possible to move from one zone to another.

'We talked to them about different coping strategies - whether it was breathing slowly, asking a trusted friend or adult for help or guidance, or taking a moment to slow down and think about what was going on and plan what they could do next. We saw that by using this model (and associated

coping strategies) at home, in school and in social situations, the boys started to change the way they reacted to new or scary situations. In school this meant that they started to be able to learn!

‘Both boys will happily explain the model to anyone who will listen, because they know and understand how it works for them. In school, the boys learned how to recognise if they were in the panic zone (and therefore unable to learn) and what each of them needed to do in order to move forward into the learning zone, little step by little step.

‘We had some real proof recently of how effective this model is – and how embedded it has become in the way we work and talk as a family. Our eldest boy recently had the opportunity to visit Japan with his school. We knew this would be a massive challenge for him, and that he would be in his panic zone for much of the time in the build up to the trip and during the trip itself. There would be so many new things for him to deal with all at once; he’d never gone on a plane or visited a foreign country before, and he was going to be out of his safe circle of folk around him. We used the model to help him prepare for all of that, talking with him about how he might feel in the different situations he would face, and what he might be able to do to help himself cope.

‘When he came back we asked him how he got on and he said, “Well, I was definitely in my panic zone for most of the week, but it was okay and I managed to get my toe in the learning zone for a good part of it.” For me, that was absolutely massive: the fact that he could be in his panic zone but cope with it, and the fact that he recognised for himself his emotions – and could manage his emotions so that he was able to do some learning. For him to be able to do that, when you consider where he came from and what a huge journey he has made, I was just so proud of him.’

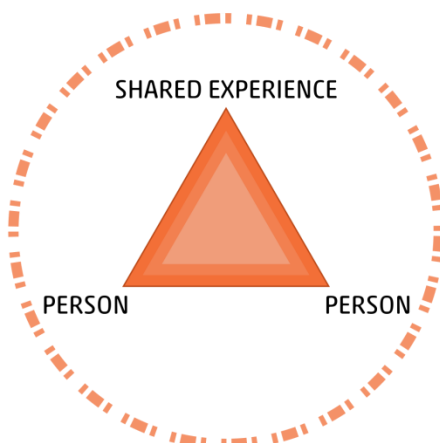
Reflection exercise – try this at home

Have a think about your own comfort, learning and panic zones. What zone are you in now and when were you last in the other two? What does each zone feel like for you? Can you identify what pushes you into your panic zone and what coping strategies work to help you get out?

Think about the children in your care. What does the panic zone feel like for them? What pushes them into their panic zone and what behaviours do they have when they are in it? What coping strategies work best to help them get out?

Have a think about whether talking to them about the Learning Zone Model could help them.

The Common Third



The second story Linda has shared centres around using a concept called **the Common Third** (Lihme, 1988). Linda shared earlier that social pedagogy has helped her to do things ‘with’ rather than ‘to’ or ‘for’ her boys. The Common Third is a concept that really helps adults and children to work together in an equal partnership. Learning and growing together rather than the adult always being in charge and the child having to passively follow.

The Common Third relates to a task or activity that is common to the child and the carer, and that is chosen as a result of

thinking carefully about how to help the child develop through their relationship. It can be as simple as doing the washing up together, or more complex in helping a child express themselves through a creative activity. Common Third activities are often at their most powerful when both carer and child 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.

Linda and the Common Third

'The Common Third is the model that we feel has really transformed the boys. It is also probably the one that has challenged and pushed us the most as a family – but in a good way! Every Common Third activity we have embarked upon has helped us to build the relationship we have with the children, and strengthened the trust the children have in us.

'We have used the Common Third really effectively to help the boys with their reading. Particularly our youngest boy who was pretty much a non-reader when he first came to live with us; he was in year three at school, but educationally he was still at the level you would expect to see in reception class. He was very fearful of learning, and actually quite scared of books, so we knew that to help him learn to read, we were going to need to try a different approach. So we tried the Common Third and the impact it had was incredible.

'We took a series of books and designed a Common Third activity that we could do together at the end of each story. This meant that every time we picked a book up – it wasn't just about the pressure of learning to read, we were more focused on the activity we would do together at the end. So while I would read the book with him, and he would start to read some of the words, he actually got more and more excited about the activity that was going to happen once we'd finished reading. By the end of doing this, going through a large number of books and activities, not only was our relationship really special – but he'd also learnt to read almost by accident.

'Within six months he'd gone from being pretty much a non-reader, to working his way through his entire school's reading list. Within nine months he was a reading mentor – helping other children with their reading! By the time he moved up to secondary school he'd crammed six years of learning into three years of primary school, meaning that he could start his new school at the same level as all of his peers - he was actually more advanced than some of them, particularly in English.

'The Common Third helped him develop a love of books! It's worked for both boys; we've been able to give them the joy of books. Opening this up for them and helping them to see what they can get from books has been the most important thing I could have done as a foster carer. They've gained imagination, widened their frame of reference, strengthened their vocabulary and discovered words to help them describe their emotions. And perhaps most importantly - they've had fun!

'In the table below you can see some of the books we've read together and some of the activities we have done. We discovered when we started this that the internet is crammed full of amazing ideas and resources that you can use and download for free. There are activity sheets and templates for all sorts of things you can do together – so next time you're reading your children a book, have a Google and see what you can find!'

The book	The Activity
<i>The Night Pirates</i> by Peter Harris	We drew an outfit for Tom and designed a new pirate ship together. The illustrations in the book use lots of different shades of similar colours so we went out in the garden and found all the different shades of green we could find.
<i>What's That Noise?</i> By Francesca Simon	We simply went outside and closed our eyes and listened to everything we could hear. We tried to identify and describe everything we could hear, and then we tried mimic all the sounds. We felt silly at first (or at least I did!) but it was fun!
<i>The Gruffalo</i> by Julia Donaldson	We found loads of quizzes and word searches online and we made our own drawings of our favourite bits of the story.
<i>The Fantastic Flying Journey</i> by Gerald Durrell	We used an inflated balloon to make chocolate baskets (we got the instructions from the internet). We also got a map of the world and plotted all the places that the children in the story visited with their uncle.

Reflection exercise – try this at home

Have a look at some the ideas that Linda shared in the table above. If you can get hold of these books, why not give them a try. Or take some of the books that are particular favourites in your house and try and design with your child your own Common Third activities to do together.

If you have older children or teenagers, talk to them about the books they are enjoying or the books they are reading for school. See whether you can create any activities that you could all share. It could strengthen your relationship with the added bonus of helping them bring their school work to life.

Find out more...

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for more Social Pedagogy in Practice sheets and further information about Head, heart, Hands.