

## Social pedagogy in practice: Supporting children and young people through placement moves

Foster carers who have taken part in our Head, Heart, Hands programme have told us that the Diamond Model (Eichsteller & Holthoff, 2012) has been particularly important to them. The model symbolises one of the most fundamental underpinning principles of social pedagogy – that there is a “diamond” within all of us. In this resource we explain the Diamond Model and then hear directly from one of the Head, Heart, Hands social pedagogues who shares a story about how the Diamond Model supported their family. There are also some try-at-home exercises which you might want to use within your own practice.

### The Diamond Model

Within The Diamond Model, the **diamond** itself symbolises the importance of taking a holistic, strengths-based view of the children and adults we work with. Our role is to look for the inner diamond in everyone, which may be very raw but can be polished with our support.



Social pedagogic practice seeks to enhance both **happiness** (short term moments of feeling good and having fun), and **wellbeing** (a more long-lasting sense of positive physical and mental health). To achieve this, a strengths-based and tailored approach is taken, to meet the needs of the individual child.

**Holistic learning** concerns not just learning in a school environment, but also learning which takes place throughout our lives. For foster carers, this is about looking for opportunities to support children’s growth and development in the shared everyday moments, and through specially chosen activities.

Social pedagogy is a **relationship**-focused approach, acknowledging that it is the relationships we have that bring meaning to our world. In order to grow and develop, children (and adults) need warm and supportive relationships. This means being authentic and honest and sharing personal things about ourselves as appropriate. It also means making the effort to understand other people’s lifeworld, seeing their experiences through their eyes.

Achieving happiness and well-being, and being able to learn, requires a sense of **empowerment** - we have to feel that we have some control over our lives, and that we understand, and are able to make, our own choices. When we are empowered we can take responsibility for our own wellbeing, learning, relationships, and social development. To accomplish this children need to be involved in decisions that affect them.

**Positive experiences** help build all these aspects of the Diamond Model as they help us form affirming memories we can draw on. Positive experiences help build confidence, which in turn supports learning and supports the forming of healthy relationships as a basis for social development.

Foster carers who have put the Diamond Model into practice have fed back that it has given them a really valuable framework which helps them to think about the work they are doing. They are able to use the model to reflect on whether what they are doing is really supporting the child to develop their happiness and wellbeing, to strengthen their relationships, to enhance their learning and feeling of empowerment and to build up a bank of positive experiences.

### **A social pedagogue's story of supporting placement moves**

The story below illustrates how one family was able to put the different elements of the Diamond Model into practice when it came to planning and supporting placement moves for a group of three siblings. It is told by a social pedagogue who worked on the Head, Heart, Hands programme and supported the family as their supervising social worker.

'Two children from a sibling group of three were to be moved from a short-term placement into a permanent placement. The sibling group consists of Paul, 13, (already in a permanent foster placement), Richard, 11, and Caroline, 7. Richard and Caroline were placed together in short-term fostering. The family finder had been trying to identify a placement for over a year for both siblings. Richard's behaviour started to escalate over the previous year, with his anxiety heightening about not knowing what was happening. Because of his behaviour the specialist teams were approached and new carers were identified for both children.

'It was decided that Caroline was to move in with Paul. Paul's carer had come forward to take all three children, however taking into account Richard's behaviour, it was felt that this was not appropriate. It was felt that Richard would benefit from a placement on his own where he could be the youngest child in the family, and where there was a big sense of community. Considering both of the available placements, it was decided that Caroline would move in with Paul, and Richard would live with other carers.

'At a meeting key aspects were discussed and debated: Richard's routine, the school's routine, the support in place for Richard at school, what he used to comfort him (a sensory box), and the strategies used by school to de-escalate his behaviour. It was agreed that a hospital and outreach teaching service worker would start working with Richard, preparing him for what was going to happen. She would start by addressing Richard's worries about the future and the present. Several agreements were made between various professionals and the foster carers.

#### **Wellbeing and happiness**

In this part of the story we see that for the team around these children the long term wellbeing of the children is paramount. For example, the team takes time for careful reflection, and looks at what can support Richard's wellbeing and happiness in the short and long term.

#### **Reflection exercise – try this at home**

Spend some time reflecting, on your own, with your family or with your supervising social worker, about how you are supporting your child's wellbeing and happiness. What does well-being mean for your child?

‘Both new carers were asked to provide a “talking photo album” for each child, which would contain pictures of their new home, their bedrooms, their new schools, their new families, nearby parks and would have recordings of their carers’ voices. If possible, a carer’s scarf or a smell they could associate with the carer would also be placed in the album. It was considered vital that a picture of all three siblings was placed at the end of the album, reiterating that they would still be seeing each other. In acknowledgement that Richard didn’t know his new carers at all, it was agreed that they would also prepare their own portfolio where they said a few things about themselves that would help Richard learn more about them. They also provided a loose photograph of themselves so the children could take this to school should they feel they wanted to share the news with their friends.

### **Holistic learning**

In this part of the story we see how the team plans to help the children learn about what will be happening in their lives. Pictures, photos, recordings and objects are used creatively to help the children make positive associations. In addition, thought is paid to how they might want to share this information with their friends, helping their social development as well.

### **Reflection exercise – try this at home**

Spend some time, either in personal reflection, or with your family or supervising social worker, thinking about the opportunities that exist for helping your child to learn beyond school. What are their interests – what might excite them about learning? What visual images, sounds, smells or other stimulations could you use to help them engage with learning?

‘It was agreed that there should be a common script so that all three children were getting the same message. The social worker was tasked with writing a clear script of what was happening and why decisions were made. This way all carers and professionals involved with the children would be repeating the same message, allowing the children to take it in and accept it without feeling confused.

‘The decision was made that the children would be told separately - it was felt that due to Richard’s behaviour and the assessment that had been carried out, he needed to feel he was a priority. Following the recommendations from the assessment, it was agreed that the social worker would speak to Richard first, explain everything as was in the script, give him the portfolio and the photo album, and allow him to ask questions. She would then speak to Caroline. This process went well.

### **Empowerment**

In this part of the story we see how the team plans to make sure that the children feel they have some control, to feel more empowered about the changes. The clear, common script helps the children feel they know what is going on and they have an opportunity to ask questions.

### **Reflection exercise – try this at home**

Next time you are planning an outing or an activity with your child, think about how they could be involved in choosing and planning what you are all going to do. For example if going on a picnic could they choose where to go using the internet or a map? Could they choose the food and prepare it with you? This will help them understand that empowerment comes with responsibility.

'It was essential for the children to have a good ending, both in their placements and in their school. The school was asked to do a send-off for both children and the last day of school was selected. Both Richard and Caroline got a book from school that their teachers wrote in and all their friends left a message, as well as contact details. They both had a farewell party. Meetings with old and new schools were set up so that all information around the children could be shared. Richard took his farewell book to the new school which made him feel valued and important.

'To enable the placement to end on a positive note, carers were asked to take the children out for the day and mark the ending with them. All of the family members that had been part of their lives also came over and said their farewells.

#### **Positive experiences**

In this part of the story we see how the team has worked hard to ensure that the endings for the children at their school and in their foster family are positive experiences. The school send-off is also marked by a book in which they receive not only messages but also contact details so they can keep in touch and feel cared for. This will support them as they move forward, giving them more positive experiences that they can draw strength from.

#### **Reflection exercise – try this at home**

Next time you are planning something with your child, spend some time reflecting on how you can help them to 'bank it' as a positive experience and memory. Can you help them anticipate it through for example researching and talking and drawing what they might see and hear, having tangible things they could show their friends such as tickets, pictures and drawings? Could you perhaps help them develop a video about the event, or a memory book: writing, drawing and pasting photos and souvenirs in their book with them?

'Dates for introductions and initial contact were established. The children were introduced to new carers by their previous foster carers, so they could see how it was ok and safe. The previous foster carers also visited both children at their new homes once they had been there for over a week. This was very important, enabling them to experience a closure to their previous placement.

'It was agreed that contact between siblings would happen more than once a month - not overnight, because all siblings would need to settle and adapt to their new realities. Carers were on board with this and the children have visited each other. Paul and Caroline have been to Richard's home, which has lessened Paul's anxieties around Richard not being with him and Caroline. Contact is agreed between carers and will take place every two weeks. Paul and Richard go ice skating together.

'Richard continues to contact his previous carers once a week - he misses them and enjoys a chat. He also speaks to their grandchildren, with whom he spent a lot of time. He is also allowed to contact his siblings when he wants to and he contacts some friends from his old school.

### **Relationships**

In this part of the story we see how the team has taken care to support the children to develop their relationships with their new carers over time, and in a way clearly supported by their previous carers to help them feel safe. The sibling relationships are also supported and we can see how Richard is able to keep up his relationships with important people from his old foster family and his old friends. A carefully thought through process like this is essential to make the transition a positive one for the children and the adults involved.

#### **Reflection exercise – try this at home**

Spend some time to think about how you might work with your child to map out the key relationships in their life, and discuss together what these relationships mean for them, and what you and the child could do to help make those relationships warmer and closer. One way of doing this could be through creating a drawing together, or using photos or toys to represent people and encouraging the child to move them about to help talk about what they mean to them.

### **Immediate outcomes**

‘Richard responded very positively to the talking photo album - he wanted to have it with him all the time. He took it to his first contact with his new foster carers to show them his pictures. The process worked very well with all of the children. Richard feels settled and has made friends around the community and has started at his new school, currently with no additional support needed. He has used his leaving book from school to contact his friends. The carers have encouraged this and he is able to keep in touch with them. He was delighted when his friends returned his calls. This has reinstated his feeling of belonging, of being loved, and part of the community. This has really helped with his confidence. He feels at home and says that it feels like he has lived there for years. He feels able to call his siblings should he want to and has asked to contact his previous carers and to see them. At the moment phone contact is maintained once a week. Richard also sent them a card to thank them for everything and has also received a card from their grandson. He holds on to anything that he feels demonstrates how much he is loved, so he has cherished this card and taken it to school.

### **Longer term impact**

‘Richard has stabilised at school, and is currently not requiring any additional support. His anxieties are contained within the placement. We hope this has had an impact on how his foster carers see him, building on the positive information and behaviour, so they are able to see him in a different light than if he was escalating his behaviour. We hope these small but important details will create firm foundations for Richard in his placement and that this will be a placement until adulthood.’



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