

## Head, Heart, Hands – positive signs at the halfway point

### Introduction

The Fostering Network's Head, Heart, Hands programme is exploring the introduction of social pedagogy into UK foster care at seven local authority and independent fostering services across England and Scotland, with the aim of improving stability, quality of care and outcomes for fostered children.

Social pedagogy is an approach to bringing up children that combines many elements and principles, such as allowing children to take appropriate risks, encouraging fostering professionals to reflect regularly on their work, and valuing foster carers as an equal part of the team around the child. The strength of social pedagogy is that it provides everyone with a common language and shared theories, making it easier for people to work as a team and respect each other's roles and perspectives.

Head, Heart, Hands was launched in summer 2012. The programme is working with the participating services to enable them to support foster carers, social workers and other members of the team around the child to develop an understanding of social pedagogy and explore how this approach can strengthen their individual practice and the wider organisational approach – all with the aim of improving experience and outcomes for children and young people.

We work with the participating fostering services on a daily basis but every six months we ask them to feedback formally on their experiences to help us capture and articulate what we are learning. The programme is being independently evaluated by the Centre for Child and Family Research at Loughborough University who are working in partnership with Catch 22's National Care Advisory Service and The Colebrooke Centre for Evidence and Implementation. The evaluation team provides six-monthly reports that help to identify the impact of the work being done. This briefing summarises a range of findings from Head, Heart, Hands at the halfway point.

### The programme so far

By the summer of 2014, 280 foster carers and social workers and other members of the team around the child had completed a 10-day course in social pedagogy. Work had also begun to embed social pedagogy throughout the participating fostering services, and to encourage a wider conversation about the potential of social pedagogy to improve fostering throughout the UK.

One participant, a foster carer, told The Fostering Network: 'Head, Heart, Hands has already changed my mindset. It has given me new skills and provided a stronger theoretical basis to support what I do and say. I feel more confident in my ability to foster and to be a voice for the child.'

Emerging evidence from the evaluation team shows that Head, Heart, Hands is beginning to make positive changes to some fostered children's lives, in particular by changing the way that carers tackle risk and reflect on their work, and in strengthening relationships.

It states that, although it is too early to collect hard evidence on the long-term outcomes for children, the evaluation team is 'starting to see the impact it is having on the practice of foster carers and social workers'. For example, a survey of participants found that nearly 80 per cent of foster carers said that their learning had already had an impact on their fostering at home.

## **The impact on individual practice**

The evidence being gathered by The Fostering Network from participants in the programme demonstrates that social pedagogy is beginning to have an impact on how they approach their work.

For example, foster carers are reporting to the organisation that they are more confident in their abilities and value having new theories and tools to help them carry out their role.

An important principle within social pedagogy is for foster carers and social workers to take time to reflect upon what they have done through formal critical reflection processes, and many participants are reporting to The Fostering Network that this reflection has influenced their decision making, particularly around risk.

The new approach is also helping foster carers to build stronger relationships between themselves and the children in their care, as well as with social workers and other people in the team around the child. Social workers too are reporting similar developments to the organisation.

As one foster carer said in feedback they provided to their fostering service following the course: “I felt that I would try something out with the children. I got each of them to write ‘what does Judy do that I like, appreciate and make me grateful for’ in a circle in the middle of a page, then round the outside write anything they could think of. I did exactly the same thing for each of them. When we had finished we shared our information and were able to really understand what each of us meant to the other. I have now put my ‘what Amy/Ross do that I like, appreciate and make me grateful for’ sheets on their bedroom walls as a reminder of all the things I appreciate.”

Crucially, the programme is changing attitudes to risk. As one foster carer put it when being interviewed by the evaluation team: “Pedagogy is trying to normalise things again, it’s trying to make your life liveable. Why should these kids feel different? We separate them and then wonder why they struggle when it comes to the outside world...”

“That’s not how to restore people, that’s not how you get people to be what they are meant to be, you have to make life normal and fun, and you know, manage risk properly, and I think that is what social pedagogy is trying to do.”

All participants – whether they are foster carers, social workers or other professionals – are benefiting from having a shared language and approach which, they tell The Fostering Network, increases their ability to work together in the best interests of fostered children.

## **The central role of the social pedagogues**

Experienced social pedagogues from across Europe are in place at the seven participating fostering services to support the programme, two in each site. The last six months has reinforced their crucial role as they have developed strong relationships with participants, worked directly with children, modelled how social pedagogy can work in practice and explored barriers to promoting social pedagogy throughout the whole fostering service.

## **Advocates and champions**

The programme now has a pool of foster carers, social workers and others who are passionate about social pedagogy. Their enthusiasm and first-hand accounts of how it has had an impact on their work will help give the necessary power to push social pedagogy forward within the services and their voice will support important national conversations.

The programme is building a library of these stories, as well as supporting these people to maintain their momentum to develop their work.

As one foster carer told The Fostering Network: “As a carer, I’ve fallen in love with the constant reminder from social pedagogy that we all started in this life of looking after vulnerable children because we wanted them to thrive, we wanted them to win, and we were going to be the voices cheering them on, forging new world views and new hope.

“I’m discovering through Head, Heart, Hands that we can claim and forge relationships, we can take and benefit from sensible risks, and we can give the very best for our children who so richly deserve it.”

## **Working with children and families**

It is too early for the programme to have hard evidence on the impact that social pedagogy is having on the long-term outcomes for children and young people in foster care. However, as outlined earlier, foster carers and social workers are starting to feel an impact on their own work and, as the programme continues, there will be more opportunities to see how children are affected by this.

As one social worker told the evaluation team: “Increased reflection of foster carers on their own practice...can be used to implement changes in the practice. This is directly impacting on improving the outcomes for children and young people. Relationships are enhanced in the team around the child and fewer barriers to communication are experienced.”

The programme is also developing new approaches to designing processes, resources and activities for children and their families. For example, it is exploring how the current allegations procedures would change and be improved under a social pedagogic approach.

## **Nurturing systemic change**

One foster carer cannot successfully take a social pedagogic approach in isolation. A central ethos of social pedagogy is that the whole team around the child must echo the same approach. This team must be supported by their fostering service, and the service’s approach needs to be understood across the wider organisation and nationally.

Head, Heart, Hands aims to create big changes throughout children’s social care within the seven demonstration services. To achieve this, awareness-raising events and other activities have been held to support fostering professionals who are not directly involved in the programme to learn about social pedagogy. The programme has secured commitment from senior managers to give service-wide messages of support for social pedagogy. Existing structures and approaches are being explored by the evaluation team to identify barriers to taking social pedagogy forward throughout entire organisations.

## Starting to describe a UK social pedagogy

While a social pedagogic approach has been used in social care in other European countries for many years, it is different in each of these countries as it needs to appropriately reflect the different cultures in which it is being applied. The Head, Heart, Hands programme aims to discover how social pedagogic foster care could work in the UK. Over the last six months the programme's ability to do this has grown considerably as the impact of the work, and the changes that have supported this, are starting to become clear.

In addition to the independent evaluation, the programme team is gathering evidence and stories about how social pedagogy is working on the ground and is using these to initiate and contribute to local and national conversations that boost awareness of social pedagogy.

## Where next?

Longer term, we believe that social pedagogy will make a real difference in the lives of fostered children and the families that care for them. We hope it will lead to increased stability, which is likely to result in cost avoidance for fostering services. Improving the outcomes and wellbeing for fostered children is also in the long-term interest of the state as it will lead to more children in care achieving their potential and making a contribution to society, and fewer being dependent on state support.

The next focus of the Head, Heart, Hands programme will be on ensuring that the participants have the best possible chance of embedding social pedagogy into their everyday practice. The Fostering Network and the evaluation team will continue to gather evidence on understanding the impact that this new approach to fostering can have on children, their families, foster carers and the system. The learning and evidence from the programme will help to demonstrate the impact of social pedagogy and start to describe what it looks like within a UK context. The success of the programme therefore has the potential to shape foster care in the years to come.

In March 2015 we are holding two conferences (one in London and one in Edinburgh) which aim to share the stories of the seven services and outline our learning about social pedagogy in UK foster care to date. These two events are aimed at national decision makers and senior members of the children's social care workforce. If you would like more information about these events please contact [freya.burley@fostering.net](mailto:freya.burley@fostering.net)

Find out more at [www.fostering.net/head-heart-hands](http://www.fostering.net/head-heart-hands)

Head, Heart, Hands is led by The Fostering Network and delivered in partnership with the social pedagogy consortium (Jacaranda Development, Professor Pat Petrie and ThemPra Social Pedagogy). The participating fostering services are Aberlour Foster Care, Capstone South West, Edinburgh City Council, Hackney London Borough, Orkney Islands Council, Staffordshire County Council and Surrey County Council.