Enhancing the resilience of children and young people in public care by mentoring their talents and interests

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ABSTRACT

It is argued that the progress and resilience of young people in public care can be greatly enhanced by attention to the value of cultural, sporting and other activities in their lives. Sensitive mentoring of the young person in these activities by concerned adults – members of the child's social network or volunteers – can foster the potential of the young person, build self-esteem, strengthen mental health and open new social relationships beyond the care system. A series of case illustrations are used to demonstrate how such involvement in activities can greatly improve the prospects for a more successful transition out of care. It is suggested that the potential of this neglected dimension of care can only be fully realized through alert professional practice, imaginative engagement with potential 'natural' mentors, supportive agency policy, effective care planning systems, and relevant training and professional supervision for social workers.

INTRODUCTION

Internationally there is growing interest in specific approaches to improving the experiences of young people in public care. This is in response to the frequently gloomy evidence about outcomes of life in care for graduates of the care system (Aldgate 1994). Ideas to improve the lot of children in care and to tackle the more glaring inadequacies of the system are receiving increasing attention. Some favour 'big' solutions such as blanket adherence to the philosophy of 'permanence'. The complexity of the challenges faced and the unlikelihood of successful 'one size fits all' solutions have led to consideration of approaches which are more incremental and customized. British models of care planning and reviews are one such example (Corrick *et al*.1995). Another is the contribution that mentors may have to make to the needs of young people isolated in care or the community (Cleaver 1996). It has been argued that achieving improvement in some parts of a young person's life in care may have important positive spill-over effects into other parts, and may often yield more ultimate benefit in terms of resilience in

the young person than 'all or nothing' approaches (Gilligan 1997). When one considers the domains in which a young person in care may live out daily relationships, they include family, care setting, school, peer group, neighbourhood, workplace, and leisure time interests and activities. Each of these domains is a source of potential relationships which may contribute positively to a young person's progress while in care. Jackson & Martin (1998), for example, report that success in education was a critical factor in distinguishing the young people in care in their study who later did well compared with those who did less well.

This paper focuses on the domain of leisure time interests and activities and ways they might be used to help young people find a more positive pathway through, and out of, life in care. Leisure time interests and activities may offer opportunities to marginalized young people, such as those in care, to 'join or re-join the mainstream' (Smith & Carlson 1997). Leisure time involvement may thus be one possible way of enhancing the resilience of young people confronted with the adversities of life before, during and after care, and one domain of functioning

which is perhaps more within the influence of the social worker and other caregivers. While the leisure time interest may be enjoyable and satisfying in itself, it is also an additional medium through which young people may be able to have access to supportive relationships. In this context, 'mentoring' is used to refer to the encouragement and support of the young-person-in-care's talents, interests and leisure activities by a committed adult. It is suggested that this is a critically important but relatively neglected or invisible role in providing for children in care. The paper initially considers some relevant conceptual issues in relation to the nature of 'care' and adult caring roles. It then cites a range of actual examples of interests and activities and related mentoring gathered from foster carers, residential workers and social workers in Ireland and Scotland. It goes on to consider the nature of adult roles in the care process and argues for recognition of the mentoring role in relation to leisure interests. The implications for social work and agencies are also explored.

FUNCTIONS OF 'CARE'

It may be said that 'care', when functioning adequately for a particular child, serves four separate functions concurrently (Fig. 1). The first of these is *maintenance*, that is to meet the child's basic developmental needs in terms of normal physical, psychological and emotional care appropriate to the child's age and stage of development, and responsive to the child's inner concerns. The second of these is *protection*. The reality is that children who enter the care system are rendered especially vulnerable to abuse and exploitation, because of the child's history and the frailties of any system of public care. Given that the decision to admit to care should improve the lot of a child, or at the very least should not worsen it, it is important that the care system is alert and active in terms of protecting children from abuse. But protection should not be cast merely in the
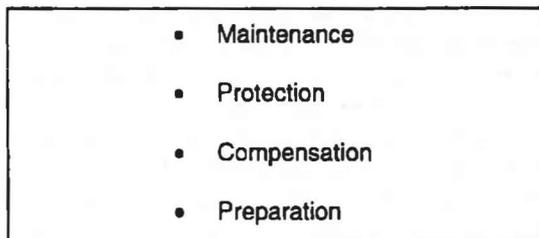
negative light of preventing abuse; it should also serve the positive purpose of protecting and promoting the rights and interests of the child, as child and as citizen.

The third function is *compensation*. This serves to help children recover from the deficits in their lives which led to or were caused by the events that prompted admission to care. This may entail extra educational support (in both the formal and informal sense), special remedial health care, or special therapeutic support to try to cleanse the child of the emotional detritus of past trauma. While it may not be possible to reverse what has happened to a child, it may still be possible to help the child make up ground lost because of past adversity. In particular, the child may be helped to view past trauma in a new light. The fourth function may be said to be that of *preparation*, that is equipping the child or young person with the emotional resilience and practical techniques and knowledge to make their way in the world when they leave care to live either in their own family or elsewhere.

There are clearly many ways in which these four functions of maintenance, protection, compensation and preparation may be served. Positive leisure time interests and hobbies are significant in that their encouragement can serve each of the four functions. They can help to promote normal development; they can help to strengthen the assertiveness and integrity of a young person vulnerable to abuse; they can help to rebuild the confidence of a young person recovering from past trauma, and they can help to equip the young person with skills and qualities necessary for coping with the future.

Achievement/performance (but without great pressure) in fields of endeavour and attainment in activities which the young person and significant others value are key ways of building self-esteem. Self-esteem is important because it serves as a vital buffer against stress (Rutter 1990). Involvement in cultural, sporting and leisure activities may foster self-esteem and can thus serve many valuable preventive functions (Quinn 1995; Borge 1996). Morale as well as mental health may be enhanced by such activities. In their study of young people in residential care, Sinclair & Gibbs (1996, p. 10) found that 'those who were involved in work or proud of something they did in their leisure time were happier'. The value for the young person of being involved lies not just in the pursuit of the activity, enjoyable though that may be. The value also lies in the recognition that performance of the activity may

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Figure 1 Key functions of public 'care'.

earn, the relationships it may open up and the confidence it may generate.

EXAMPLES OF ACTIVITIES AND MENTORING IN THE AREAS OF CULTURE, ANIMAL CARE AND SPORT

There follow a number of examples from actual cases of resilience enhancing activities benefiting actual young people in care. These range over involvement in cultural pursuits, the care of animals and sport. (I am grateful to the carers and professionals who have furnished me with these case examples under the usual cloak of confidentiality, thus preventing my acknowledging them by name.) It is clear in each of these examples that the young person's initiation into or continued participation in the relevant activity has been or is being facilitated by helpful adults who relate to the child in a number of roles ranging from caregiver to 'mentor' of the specific activity.

Cultural pursuits

One example of a cultural interest concerns a boy in foster care who had a strong interest in and aptitude for *performing dance*. This provoked much sexist mockery from his peers in the foster home but the foster carer doggedly supported his involvement in the face of this ridicule and his own severe self-doubt in anticipation of his first major public performance. His debut was in fact a great success and this whole experience had a transformative effect on his view of himself and his future. This is an excellent example of the importance of a caregiver showing perseverance to help the young person exploit one precious positive thread in that young person's life. The message from each of the examples is that resilience-enhancing potential of a single interest/activity may help turn around a whole situation.

In another instance a girl who was weak academically had her attachment to school sustained by her success and involvement in the *school choir*. For another young woman previously in foster care, encouragement of a talent in *art* has led ultimately to successful graduation from Art College. For another boy with extreme behavioural difficulties a sessional art teacher attached to his specialist residential unit fostered a talent in art to the extent that the boy came second in state exams nationally in art and had an exhibition of his work held in the local library. Needless to say the impact of these successes on the boy's self-image and behaviour was enormous.

Care of animals

van Houtte *et al.* (1995) found in their study that pet-owning pre-adolescents were more autonomous than non-pet owners of the same age. This suggests that pet ownership may be a way of encouraging more autonomy in young people about to enter adolescence. This insight about the value of animals may be especially relevant in work with children in care. The following case examples certainly illustrate the therapeutic value of relationships with animals for such youngsters.

In one case, a city boy placed in a rural foster home illustrated the power of relationships with and interest in animals. This boy had lost confidence in himself and others because of an emotionally abusive atmosphere at home prior to coming into care. Getting to know local farmers and their *animals* opened up new possibilities for the boy. The trust and responsiveness the animals showed to him helped build the boy's self-esteem in a way which his social worker says he could not have done. In the view of the social worker it is thanks to these healing relationships with animals that he is now a reasonably contented adult holding down a steady job.

In another case, a girl placed in a relatively remote foster home, foster carers drive her 25 miles each way every Saturday morning to a stable where she gets horse-riding lessons and helps in the stable. This also led to her getting a summer job in the stable. According to the foster carers' social worker, this set of experiences has helped very much to 'ground' what was previously a troubled and unsettled young person.

For another child for whom a *dog* was the one constant figure in his life, an agency found itself paying briefly for kennelling while the aftermath of a placement disruption resolved itself. For this boy the relationship with his dog symbolized the only constancy in his life.

Sport

One example involves a teenage girl in residential care who spends a lot of time playing, training and travelling in connection with *basketball*. Crucially, as with many such enthusiasms for youngsters in care, it introduces her to adults and young people far removed from the care system. She is a trialist for a regional schools team which, according to her carers, has had a big effect on her view of herself and the perception care staff in her residential unit have of her.

A nine-and-a-half-year-old in foster care was worried about her image in school as clumsy and slow. Her sympathetic foster carers were searching for ways to try to improve her coordination and self-confidence and somehow hit upon the idea of *skiing* lessons on a local dry ski slope. This turned out to be an inspired move. She proved to be a natural on the slopes and the star of her class, with an obvious knock-on effect on her self-belief. Interestingly the social worker involved was expressing reservations about the foster carers' emphasis on activity and the clumsiness problem, wishing instead that the carers would focus more on the underlying emotional issues. This again highlights a common tendency among professionals to discount the value of the 'ordinary' or mainstream opportunities which exist in the child's social network and community. Children may gain more, therapeutically, from engagement in 'mainstream' activities which are removed from the stigma of specialist treatment, and which are not preoccupied with clinical definitions of problems. This certainly seemed true in this instance. When the child herself was asked she showed appreciation of how the carers were actually helping her with what were *her* concerns about learning and acceptance in school. The activity of skiing, instead of being a distraction from the core issues, was the very medium which was responsive to the child's needs and helped her turn a crucial corner in her development.

Success in *sprinting* at a national level has been a huge boost to a boy in residential care who previously was underperforming in school. His social skills and academic achievement have improved. He enjoys the support of coaches and other adults in the athletics world who take a special interest in him. His networks and horizons have greatly expanded.

A boy of 17 with emotional and academic difficulties has been greatly helped by success on a local *football* team. Having been previously in residential care, playing football has also helped his integration into the local community of his foster carers to the extent that a summer job was found for him in a local supermarket, on a basis it seems rather like that of how (amateur) rugby clubs used to find jobs for talents who might otherwise be lost to their cause. Involvement in football opened up opportunities and supports which might not otherwise have been available.

In preparing young people for life after care it is important among other things to help the child to rehearse, observe and discuss problem-solving skills and strategies. While some of this work can be done in an explicit and direct way – for instance taking young people through a customized course on coping with life in care, or a course on dealing with being bullied, interests and activities and the support of a mentor may also provide important opportunities in this regard.

The natural pro-social tendencies of the child in care may have to be nurtured or re-awakened, and leisure time interests and activities can facilitate this. Certain behaviours by parents or carers seem more closely associated with pro-social behaviour: clear messages about principles, rules, expected behaviour and the essential goodness of the child. Adults should also model the standards desired of the child; and be warm and responsive towards the child (Schaffer 1996, pp. 275–276). They should also view the young person less as 'victim' and more as 'resource' (Finn & Checkoway 1998). Again activities and interests skilfully encouraged by mentors or concerned adults may serve as a very valuable outlet for the transmission of these key messages.

There is a nice example of pro-social behaviour by youngsters in care in a small residential unit. The young people living there organized a fundraising cake sale in their neighbourhood for a local children's hospital. The children's idea quickly won the support of staff and the project was a considerable success at a number of levels. It may seem a trivial example in some ways but it is easy to overlook the gains in terms of self-esteem due to recognition earned and successful completion of the task chosen, in terms of relations with the local community, in terms possibly of enhanced expectation by the care staff of the children's competence, and in terms of sensitivity to the needs of others.

The strong interest shown by young people in 'green' issues opens up opportunities for environmental projects involving, or even led by, young people in care. Similarly community arts offer scope for involvement by vulnerable young people, whether in care or not, which promotes social integration, social skills and social confidence (Cotterell 1996, pp. 198–199). Young people defined by others as vulnerable can also make a major contribution to community development in their neighbourhoods if given the right opportunities (Finn & Checkoway 1998). Some of the case examples cited earlier in the paper illustrate the potential of the arts well. Similarly some of the examples cited illustrate the potential of projects concerning the care and welfare of animals. In these and other such instances, the powerful potential of the school as a site and resource for the

mentoring of young people's interests should not be neglected (Gilligan 1998).

WHOSE TASK IS IT TO ENCOURAGE AND SUPPORT LEISURE TIME INTERESTS FOR YOUNG PEOPLE IN CARE?

It is suggested that adults concerned with the welfare of children in care and seeking to assist in the key tasks of maintenance, protection, compensation and preparation may play five supportive roles (Fig. 2) singly or in various combinations depending on their status and function in the child's life. At least three of these roles may engage closely with the encouragement of leisure time interests.

Key adult roles in relation to the child in care

The *caregiver* is the adult with primary daily care responsibilities who ideally should have a partisan and strategic commitment to the young person's well-being. The caregiver should be attuned to the child's inner worlds, and responsive to their needs and concerns at an emotional level (McFadden 1992). The *social worker* represents the agency responsible for the child's well-being and should have a working relationship with the child, caregiver and natural family and a long-term view of the child's needs and plans to meet them. The *advocate* may be a concerned adult, a parent or other relative, a professional or a person nominated under law by the agency to argue the case for the child's interests in formal decision-making, or in instances of disputed practice or planning. Jackson & Martin (1998) cite, for example, the potential role of the foster carer as an advocate for the foster child's educational needs and rights. The *counsellor* may play a part if the child is referred for special help, although of course the child may also receive counselling-type help from the caregiver. It is of course also possible for the social worker to take on

a counselling role in relation to the child's inner world, if they have the time, commitment and competence. Finally the *mentor* role, it is contended here, involves encouraging talents and interests in the young person which help to build confidence, self-esteem and social skills.

Of the five roles, three seem most relevant to the support of leisure time interests. The caregiver clearly has a role in relation to leisure time interests in all kinds of practical and other ways. The social worker may have various parts to play in this regard not least in relation to the securing of resources needed. The mentor may supply the vital personal attention and encouragement which sustains the interest.

Mentors of the talents and interests of young people in care

The mentor, as conceived here, encourages and teaches. A mentor gives time and attention to the young person, the experience of which may help young people in care to do better (Jackson & Martin 1998). A mentor may undertake this role arising from their relationship with the child as caregiver, but equally the relationship may arise organically through relationships and opportunities which emerge in the local community. A mentoring relationship with someone other than a caregiver or a professional with obligations to the child, it is suggested, is more desirable in principle since it gives the young person access to what hopefully proves to be an *additional* positive relationship. Like the emerging family group conferences and relative placements, a mentoring relationship with someone in the young person's informal social network may harness naturally occurring resources and relationships for the benefit of the young person (Dubowitz *et al.* 1993; Marsh & Crow 1998). As Werner & Smith (1992, p. 208) observe, this type of relationship with 'informal and personal ties to kith, kin, and community' may be more acceptable to young people than what may prove more impersonal contacts with 'formal bureaucracies'.

This concept of mentoring is narrower than that advocated by Cleaver (1996, pp. 26–27) who envisages a committed confidant-type role for a mentor as an antidote to the isolation and paucity of adults to whom to relate experienced by many young people in care. The concept of mentoring proposed here also differs from Cleaver's proposal in that she seems to assume that the mentor will be a professional, while in my version the mentor might be more likely to be a non-professional, or at least not acting in a profes-

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- Caregiver

- Social worker

- Advocate

- Counsellor

- Mentor

Figure 2 Key adult roles in the care of children in public care.

sional capacity. Perhaps in Cleaver's conception, mentoring is closer to what was termed earlier as the counsellor role, or some combination of the advocacy and counselling roles. The mentor, in the model proposed here, often relates to the young person not because they are in care, but because of an interest and enthusiasm shared with the young person. Unless the mentor happens also to be a caregiver or a professional, the mentor serves as an additional adult to whom the young person can relate (a goal seen by Cleaver as important). There are two further benefits, it is suggested: the relationship is independent of the young person's dependent care status, and the mentor is a person independent of the care system, which may contribute to greater transparency of practices within that system.

This mentoring role in relation to a young person's interests and talents can be resilience-enhancing and can play a vital part in accomplishing the four tasks of care proposed earlier: maintenance, protection, compensation and preparation. Adults involved in a young person's care should be constantly alert to opportunities to encourage talents and interests, and to nurture relationships which seem likely to support these. This should be high on the agenda of every agency providing care, every social worker, every caregiver, and at every formal care planning or review exercise.

It must be acknowledged of course that this form of mentoring work may have been done at times and in many ways over the years in relation to children in care – often by volunteers or befriending families. But as many care systems become more formalized – and child protection concerns predominate – the space for this more informal involvement may become squeezed out and the actual value of such an input may come to be forgotten. Agency anxiety may foreclose the possibility of any 'pure' motivations for volunteer involvement with vulnerable young people. And yet such voluntary involvement may be very helpful in encouraging young-people-in-care's interest in positive activities (Kahan 1994, p. 104). A purpose of the paper is to re-assert the importance of this type of mentoring role in the care of children in out-of-home situations, and the possibility and value of benign interest in young people in need. The value of nurturing leisure time interests and talents may seem obvious but the gloomy evidence about many young people's lives in care systems suggests that it is a point worth re-emphasizing repeatedly. Clearly involvement in activities and mentoring cannot substitute for, or

compensate for the lack of, a stable relationship with a caregiver. But it is suggested that it can nevertheless be an important source of continuity and support through a care career.

Mentoring, as considered here, involves giving 'quality time' to a young person in the context of a shared interest, commitment or activity. It very likely involves the adult sharing with the young person a mutual enthusiasm, interest or talent and cultivating that quality in the youngster. Mentoring relationships may give valuable constructive and personal attention to the young person and may be most effective when focused on teaching a skill (Darling et al. 1994, p. 228). Mentoring relationships may help young people find a niche in the world of work or may endow them with a life-long hobby. Some research evidence suggests that relationships with mentors may be particularly valuable for boys (Werner & Smith 1992, p. 86).

Mentors may be important in validating in the young person's eyes the young person's effort, ability and personal qualities. The young person may experience this positive feedback as more genuine perhaps than praise from a parent, caregiver or best friend whom the young person may suspect feels obliged to offer such praise (Darling et al. 1994, pp. 229–230).

An adult who serves in a mentoring capacity to a young person might be a volunteer, a relative or a professional. They might be a coach on a sports team, an uncle, or a teacher. They might also of course be a caregiver or social worker. While all young people in care presumably will automatically have a caregiver and social worker, my contention is that behind every young person doing well there is likely to be someone who consciously or unconsciously is playing a *mentoring* role.

It is interesting, by the way, to ponder the close resonance between the sense of mentoring as the cultivation of an interest in or aptitude for a specific activity, and the more general sense of *fostering* as in fostering or bringing on a quality or talent.

As mentioned, mentoring may be done by caregivers, it may sometimes be done by social workers, but quite often it will be done by other adults, relatives, friends or even, initially, strangers who come to take an interest in the child. These mentoring relationships are very precious and important. They are a way of attending to the social and emotional support needs of young people in care which are so important (Cashmore & Paxman 1996, pp. 175–176). They are also one of the ways of involving ordinary

members of the community in the care of children in state care, something recommended by Maluccio *et al.* (1990). It is contended that legitimate anxieties about, for instance, child protection should not stifle vital opportunities for young people to enjoy such contact with willing mentors in the community. Ideally, such mentoring relationships will emerge organically within the young person's social network and relationships. While professionals can use skill and tact, in the background, to nurture such a relationship, their role should mainly be to foster the conditions in which the relationship may ripen and thrive. In my view such relationships will hold more promise if not prescribed into life; it seems best the less contrived or 'specially constructed' such relationships are. This is supported by relatively equivocal American evidence on the impact of organized schemes of mentoring relying on mentors from outside the young person's natural networks (Jenson *et al.* 1986; Scales & Gibbons 1996). It is suggested that formally organized schemes for the recruitment and support of mentors may yield less fruitful and profound relationships than may emerge informally in a child's network, given the right nurturing and encouragement of an adult's interest and concern. In fairness, it should be acknowledged that such schemes may have potential if nothing else is on offer in terms of constructive adult interest, and if they are well conceived and organized (Jenson *et al.* 1986; Payne *et al.* 1995).

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY AND PRACTICE

This focus on the value of activities and mentoring for young people raises certain issues for agencies and practitioners.

How can agencies responsible for the well-being of a young person in their care assess the motives of adults who engage in a mentoring relationship with a young person?

In the current climate a key question is the sensitive vetting of mentors who emerge from a child's natural social network. Clumsy approaches may kill off genuine and precious *bona fide* interest and concern. While some checking of *bona fide*s will be necessary, perhaps the key test to be applied in such circumstances should be 'what would a prudent parent decide?'. This may be more appropriate than reliance on excessively elaborate agency procedures.

How are potential mentors to be found?

They may possibly exist in the child's own social network of origin, in the neighbourhood in which they currently or previously lived, in a current or past school, or within a sports or youth organization in which they have been involved. They may possibly be found within church organizations, voluntary social services or training centres or workplaces with which the young person has been associated. A relative, a neighbour, the parent of a friend, a current or former teacher, a local shopkeeper with a leisure enthusiasm they are willing to share, a sports coach – any one or more of these may have a potential role as mentor for an interest, hobby or talent. Mentors may also emerge from a caregiver's – or indeed a social worker's – own social network. With encouragement and practical support, the young person's caregiver may take on a pro-active mentoring role. Indeed, Jackson & Martin (1998) strongly argue for foster carers to be given an explicit mentoring role in relation to the educational progress of young people in care. In any of the above instances, the young person already knows the mentor, or at least gets to know the mentor through the adults key to their well-being. The advantage of such relationships which emerge 'organically' is that they might be more durable and more subject to scrutiny and transparency, in that the prospective mentor is not a complete 'unknown'. Potential mentors may also be found within special interest organizations related to a young person's interest. With skilful searching and persuasion, a willing mentor may emerge from a local chess club to encourage the talent of a young chess player who lives in care, or from local riding stables to nurture a talent with horses. People with professional or other in-depth experience of the needs of young people may also be a fruitful source, for example former youth workers, foster carers, etc. Finally, mentors might be recruited through dedicated schemes advertised to the public.

To find potential mentors requires knowledge (or access to knowledge) of one or more of relevant network memberships, relevant community organizations, relevant special interest organizations, and of effective means of communicating with the public or key segments thereof. Using a tool such as the Social Network Map may help to systematize efforts to find potential mentor figures in a child's or caregiver's network (Tracy 1990). The particular strengths of the Family Group Conference and how it mobilizes the interest and attention of family networks may make it

an invaluable forum for generating ideas and energy around potential mentoring relationships (Marsh & Crow 1998). The possible sources of mentors are listed in Fig. 3.

What part does the social worker play?

It is suggested that the social worker has at least three key roles in relation to such mentoring activity. Firstly they must place the issue of encouraging interests and talents high on the agenda of the caregiver and of care review and planning processes. In their contact with the young person they must be alert to any hints of interests, talents or hobbies which might usefully be encouraged. The second role they play is in identifying or recruiting a potential mentor and helping nurse the relationship into life. As discussed above, this may mean having or drawing on special knowledge of the relevant social networks and community. It may mean trawling the networks of the child, natural parents, school community, neighbourhood, caregivers and so on in order to see if there is a mentoring relationship in embryo or a candidate with the qualities and interests which could stimulate and sustain a helpful mentoring relationship with a young person over time. In looking for possible figures to serve as mentors, the social worker obviously needs to consult the principals in the child's life – the child, the caregiver, the natural parents and the school. The third key social work role is in supporting the mentor or in ensuring such support is provided for. A successful mentoring relationship may mean that the young person confides

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- Young person's own social networks

- Caregiver and caregiver's social networks

- Neighbourhood organizations (church, school, workplace, voluntary social service groups)

- Special interest organizations (sport, culture, outdoor pursuits, etc.)

- Individuals with relevant knowledge of youth needs (former foster carer, youth worker, etc.)

- Advertising to general public

Figure 3 Possible sources of mentors for interests and talents.

in the mentor and discloses difficult material about past or current problems. A mentor should be able to rely, in such circumstances, on support and advice from the social worker or someone competent acting on the social worker's behalf.

Must mentors be 'indigenous' or can they be specifically recruited as volunteers?

In assessing the relative merit of 'indigenous' or 'external' mentors, it may be helpful to consider the qualities which are desirable in any mentor. These would seem to include a deep interest in the young person, enjoying their company, having an enthusiasm which they enjoy sharing with the young person, an understanding of and respect for the young person's cultural background, a sensitivity to the impact of negative experiences on the young person's confidence, mood and behaviour, and an awareness of the proper boundaries of responsibility and behaviour. Above all young people seem to value relationships with adults they trust (Galbo 1986; Scales & Gibbons 1996). It is suggested that mentors who emerge organically from within networks have certain strengths in relation to these specifications. They are more likely to be a 'known quantity' and therefore a little more subject to scrutiny and accountability. They may owe a deeper loyalty to the child based on their network ties. This may lead to greater depth and continuity of involvement – very precious for a child often subjected to rapid-fire changes in concerned adults. The 'indigenous' mentor is also likely to be more adept in observing the cultural nuances of ethnic, religious or social class differences (Haight 1998). Notwithstanding the possible advantages of 'indigenous' mentors, it may not always be possible to find the right person at the right time in this way. There would seem therefore to be scope for establishing specific schemes in which volunteers or quasi-volunteers (paid a very modest allowance) could seek to establish a mentoring-type relationship with a young person. The potential of such a scheme in helping care leavers has been proposed (Cathcart 1998). The Swedish contact person scheme might be a model, in that it uses 'paid volunteers' (Andersson 1993). This helps to ensure a slightly higher level of accountability and support through training and supervision. In terms of recruitment schemes there may be need for extra attention to issues of continuity of involvement and safety of mentor behaviour. Volunteer schemes could try to target in particular either groups with special

experience or the general public. The potential of active ongoing links with outdoor pursuits, sporting and other special interest organizations as a resource for the care system becomes an issue in this regard.

Are there special issues raised by mentoring young people in care specifically?

The answer has to be in the affirmative. The relationship with a mentor has the potential to take on depths of meaning which might not apply where a child has not been subject to losses and the other adversities which usually have attended the lives of children in the care system. A mentoring relationship abruptly cut short, or where the mentor proves unreliable, could be very unhelpful for a young person still reeling from past adult betrayals of trust. The emotional and behavioural problems of young people in care may also prove a severe test of 'grace under pressure' for a mentor. Patience and a scrupulous sense and observance of boundaries become very important. Lest this all seem rather daunting, the research evidence suggests the positive significance of relationships of this kind for young people lacking normal home supports (Werner & Smith 1992).

What are key ingredients of agency policy in mentoring talents and leisure time interests of young people in care?

The ingredients are relatively simple, but hard to deliver. They include an unwavering conviction about the importance of encouraging the talents and interest of the young person in care; courage to escape some of the more defensive instincts of social service bureaucracies; funding of staff development and supervision in this area; an emphasis on this area in the recruitment, training and support of carers; an explicit focus on these issues in care planning; and the availability of budgets which can encourage youngsters' interests appropriately and which can support mentoring, and the possibility of each young person in care having a number of vouchers to 'spend' on interests and activities.

CONCLUSION

There are no magic solutions to the problems of care systems and the young people reliant on them. It has been argued, however, that the progress and resilience of at least some young people in care can be greatly enhanced by attention to the value of cultural,

sporting and other activities in their lives. Sensitive mentoring of the young person in these activities by concerned adults can foster the potential of the young person, build self-esteem, strengthen mental health, open new social relationships and greatly improve the prospects for a more successful transition out of care. It is suggested that the potential of this neglected dimension of care can only be fully realized through alert professional practice, sensitivity to the frequently untapped potential in natural social networks, supportive and imaginative agency policy, effective care planning systems, and relevant training and professional supervision. It is proposed that the value of mentoring is greatest when built on a shared enthusiasm between adult and young person, and ideally when the mentor emerges naturally from a child's social network. It is accepted that some mentoring schemes may have to be organized to cater for young people who are very isolated, but it is contended that these are likely to be less fruitful as a source of successful and enduring relationships. It is also suggested that fuller appreciation of the therapeutic potential of everyday participation in sport, cultural and leisure activities may help lift some of the gloom and pessimism that surround many expectations of care outcomes.

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