

Working with exploited children; Best practice in residential children's homes. By Danielle Gaye

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Abstract:

This best practice guide has been written following 15 months managing a residential children's home in the South West of England. The home is registered to support four children and specialises in looking after children who have been exploited, either sexually or criminally. When I took over the home in August 2018 the home was rated as 'requires improvement' by Ofsted. Over the course of the last 15 months, the home has grown and developed and is now rated as 'Outstanding' in all areas.

In the last 12 months I have completed the ACSEP1 course with Parents Against Child sexual Exploitation (PACE) and found that this formed the basis of the homes work and ethos. PACE have developed the relational safeguarding model and this is at the core of their work with exploited children and their families. This holistic approach has enabled me to develop my home, and other specialist Cambian homes in the South West region.

As a registered manager, I have always felt that residential children's homes are still misunderstood by professionals, especially when working with exploited children. This guide aims to provide an overview of how residential children's homes work, achieve best outcomes and are successful in supporting the most vulnerable children.

Pre move into residential care:

The work completed around a move into a residential home can be key in terms of placement stability and success. An experienced registered manager should have identified what they are looking for in terms of a new child moving in the home prior to the admission process commencing.

This should be based around the child's age, behaviour, the needs of the other children in the home and the skills of the team.

To give a child the best start in their new home, professionals must be transparent, open and honest in terms of the child's history, as well as being

outcome focused in terms of what they wish the home to achieve. This ensures everyone, including the child and their family, is clear on why professionals feel the placement is needed, how it can support them and link into permanence planning.

Within Cambian, the assessment process is used to meet with the child, their family and typically their social worker. The process includes gathering as much information about the child, the exploitation they have suffered and gives the chance for the child to ask questions about the home.

Sometimes the manager completing the assessment will share the completed assessment with other homes that have expressed an interest in caring for the child. Once this is completed, those homes that wish to offer a placement will inform commissioning and then this will be shared with the Local Authority who can then decide where they wish to place the child.

The matching process, which is comprehensive and cannot be rushed, is often an area that is misunderstood by those who do not work in residential childcare. The matching process, if thorough, will ensure the placement is sustainable for all children living in the home – this is particularly important in homes supporting exploited children. Not only does the home need to ensure the children can live safely alongside each other, considering their behaviours and risks around them, the locality and information regarding the associated offenders needs to be carefully considered.

Best practice would include the home liaising with all professionals working with the child before they agree a move and also discussing this with the police in terms of safety of the location and others currently living in the immediate area.

This leads onto why emergency placements are often not suitable for residential homes. Often, emergency 'same day' placements do not allow for the detailed planning prior to a move. Without the detailed planning and consideration around the new child moving into the home, placements fail to identify what the child needs and how they will provide this. This often leads to placements breaking down, outcomes not being achieved and children being placed at greater risk.

Relational safeguarding:

The most effective outcomes for victims of exploitation often occur when those supporting them use a relational approach to safeguarding. This approach is a process that enables professionals to work in partnership "facilitating and supporting them, in order to maximise the ability and capacity of statutory agencies' and families' to safeguard a child at risk of/being sexually exploited". In terms of children who have been exploited, their families are often not the cause

of the concerns and are protective factors in safeguarding the child. Despite this, we often see families excluded from care and safety planning which disempowers them to learn from professionals and eventually reunite with the child in the future.

This is an approach that can be used in residential care which can lead to positive and sustainable outcomes for all. Often, the view of residential children's homes is that it is a 'last resort' for those children who are at the greatest risk and are the most challenging. Whilst it is true that residential homes can offer extensive and higher levels of support, they can also become a hub of resource and expertise that not only supports the child, but the network around them.

A recent example of relational safeguarding being used in a residential setting was when the home supported a child and her family who had been the victims of exploitation in a large city in England. The child's mother was included in all aspects of the initial Child in Need (CIN) and Child Protection (CP) planning, as well as being part of the planning for the child's move into care. The child's social worker had a strong understanding of exploitation and working with families and was supported by a Child Sexual Exploitation (CSE) Advanced Practitioner in the Local Authority who advocated for a relational approach. From this, the social worker explored the various placement options for the child. It was important for the child's Mother that the relational approach to safeguarding her daughter was maintained within the placement and after reading various home statement of purposes, chose our home.

At all points throughout the child's time at the home, the Mother was included and updated regarding any concerns and decision making. This was key for her as she still held Parental Responsibility for the child and the long term care plan was for reunification. Working together with professionals, the Mother was able to keep her child safe in the short term by moving her away from the offenders. Additionally, she was supported to develop her knowledge around safeguarding, which built up her resilience in this area. Throughout the duration of the placement, the home developed a bespoke package of care and the team at the home worked closely with a range of professionals including the Local Authority, police, housing and voluntary organisations in the community. The team of professionals communicated regularly and this enabled care planning to continuously develop and ensure all involved, including the Mother were up to date and aware of any actions assigned to them. Following this, the Mother, child and her brothers were relocated safely to a new home in another area.

Planning for success:

Once the family had been safely relocated a robust move on plan was developed for the child. Again, this included all professionals and the Mother. It was important that the move on plan was detailed and the Local Authority took the time to ensure the child was properly settled in their new home, school and life before the support from the home ceased. The move on plan lasted for 12 weeks with a 4 week package of outreach support for the family once the placement had ended. Ofsted noted "The staff go to great and noteworthy lengths to make these moves successful. For example, they facilitated specialist training at the new schools of one child and their siblings, to deepen the understanding of staff at the schools of the impact of abuse and exploitation. Another example includes staff helping a parent set up the child's new bedroom with all the items that are important to them. "

This relational safeguarding approach does not have a beginning or an end but needs to run as a constant feature throughout the placement for outcomes and move on plans to be sustainable and safe. The child's Mother is still in regular contact with the home, asking for advice and support when needed. The Local Authority now has no involvement with the family and they are doing well. The team also continue to invite the Mother to any training opportunities and sign post her to local agencies that may be able to also provide guidance.

To conclude, it is key for children who have been exploited to receive high quality care from professionals who understand them and are working collaboratively alongside families. Residential children's homes can provide a specialist service that holistically meets the needs of both children and their families. The journey throughout the child's time in the home needs to ensure their welfare is paramount through robust joint decision making and care planning. Practitioners must be reflective and continuously build on the child's and their family's strengths, whilst confidently managing high levels of contextualised risk, in order for the child to move on from the homes and live successful and happy lives in the future.

Notes:

1. Advanced child sexual exploitation practitioner. Level 4 accredited course which provides an extensive understanding about child sexual exploitation, the impact of trauma, how to work effectively with victims and their families, disruption tactics, legislation, how to use contextual and relational safeguarding approaches, how to support families through the court process, how to work effectively in multi-agency teams and online exploitation.

2. <https://www.paceuk.info/wp-content/uploads/2013/11/Relational-Safeguarding-Model-FINAL-PRINTEDMay-2014.pdf>