

# That's what we do!

**Craig Paul**

## **Abstract**

For many children, some life experiences before Harmeny have not always been positive. Many have experienced significant early years trauma and we could not allow this pandemic to rock their foundation; too many bricks had been added to their secure base since they arrived. As I reflect on life at Harmeny since the impact of COVID-19 gripped the world, I could not be prouder of all our adults who have kept the service going around the clock. 'That's what we do!' is a regular response, demonstrating their unconditional commitment. They have, like our colleagues in other residential services, given so much (professionally and personally) and the children will never forget it! I dedicate these memories to form part of our life story....

## **Keywords**

COVID-19, relationships, trauma-informed, resilience, residential childcare, kindness, Scotland

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## **That's what we do!**

Recently, when one of our cottage team managers was looking for new material to inform her induction session, 'Working in the life space', I instantly knew what to recommend from my bookshelf. I shared *A Guide to Therapeutic Child Care – What You Need to Know to Create a Healing Home* (Emond, Steckley and Roesch-Marsh). Many of you will have a copy of this, but if you have reached for this since March you will notice that there is not a chapter on 'How to adapt practice during a worldwide pandemic', and that the index doesn't include words like 'isolation', 'bubbles', 'social distancing' or 'furloughing'. The authors understandably couldn't have known that we would need them.

However, while child care theory doesn't falter during such a time, approaches to practice may need to adapt. Remaining steadfast to our residential childcare practice and core values has supported the psychological challenges that lay ahead.

Harmeny Education Trust Limited<sup>1</sup> is a Scottish charity, providing residential and day education for children of primary age up to secondary stage 2, who have complex additional support needs, which may be as a result of early years trauma, through abuse, neglect or significant family disruption. Our core service, Harmeny School, is grant aided by the Scottish Government and offers specialist care and education services to children, aged 5 to 14, referred from local authorities throughout the whole of Scotland. In addition, we are looking to expand our services to young people, aged 15+, and have launched the 'Learning for Life Appeal', in order to raise £2.4million to improve our learning and care facilities.

COVID-19 arrived with a sharp injection of adversity that tested the children's unstoppable resilience and determination, and emphasised their compassion for others. Like all services, we responded swiftly to ensure that meeting the

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<sup>1</sup> [www.harmeny.org.uk](http://www.harmeny.org.uk)

children's needs continued to be delivered, without compromise. The sense of safety offered to the children could not be diluted.

With our purpose being to provide stimulating learning opportunities and commitment to bridging the attainment gap, the Easter break allowed us time to formulate a plan that would see the curriculum delivered from the comfort of the children's cottages. Each of the four residential cottage teams was matched with a dedicated teaching team, comprising teacher, social educator and education support worker. This holistic bubble was complemented by a member of the Harmeny Outdoors team, who was able to deliver learning within our 35-acre campus or within our community garden, which included learning in our newly created Forest School or tending the vegetable plot.

During Phase 1, our day service children were initially supported virtually and also enjoyed completing homework tasks that were posted home. When we were able to restart visiting them, they enjoyed going for a walk in their local area and the adult was also able to check in and assess how they were coping with Lockdown. Our local authority partners were appreciative of this level of support, at a time when they were restricted to working from home.

This structure allowed us to support their emotional wellbeing, a pre-requisite for learning. It also allowed us to see the four cottages being independent from one another; a new concept at Harmeny, where the systemic community plays a vital role in connectedness and neighbourliness. No longer would a child call their friend from another cottage over to play in their garden or the young person who attends the local mainstream school go into the village to hang out. This was our version of lockdown.

We had to adapt; that's what we do! Technology was vital in allowing the young people to remain connected to their friends from other cottages and of course their families, who had to respect the guidance of not travelling during Phase 1. The children coped remarkably.

The cottage teams understood the complexity of tuning in to the needs of our children, who have complex social, emotional and behavioural needs due to early years trauma. During lockdown, this remained possible by ensuring that the

needs of the adult carers were met, thereby reducing the emotional and physical demands placed on them. We did this by providing clear guidance and training on issues such as good hand hygiene and infection control. We also sourced gym equipment for adults, to promote their physical and mental health, at a time when the leisure industry was in lockdown. Throughout the crisis we ensured appropriate staffing levels, and space to share any feelings or reflect on practice. The importance of relational care and trauma-informed practice ensured that we could hold the children in mind and reduce their feelings of loss. We did this by ensuring that those with whom the children have a close relationship would continue to be there for them. Relational care provided a source for recovery.

Trust at all levels of the Harmeny system was key to supporting the children to cope: trust in the management team to provide the correct support, guidance and protocols, as well as trust in the carers to support the children to cope with the 'new normal' and ensure that they could connect in a variety of ways with their loved ones. To support the children to cope with any potential 'isolation procedure' we provided an opportunity, in advance, for them to see the PPE and how the carers would be kitted out. This was particularly appropriate from a trauma-informed perspective and also allowed them to adjust to a different communication style as our full facial expressions were reduced.

Arrangements for time with family or loved ones was reflected in the national guidance and we responded in line with the Scottish Government's 'route map' phases. Initially, when physical visits were not in place, our carers promoted the use of technology and also good old-fashioned postcard writing! The children coped extremely well with not having their usual arrangements in place. This was partly due to the trust that they have in the carers and family members to help them to understand the exceptional circumstances, and the parcels sent from home helped too. For some, anxiety is high when anticipating a visit from a family member, and with this removed, it allowed them to be more relaxed with the alternative arrangements.

When we did reintroduce visits, we provided a pictorial guide to ensure that expectations were met, which reduced anxiety in the child, family or professionals. We also used a 'booking system' to ensure that the family centre

could be used and sanitised between visits, which also helped to ensure a suitable pace.

The arrangements also reflected the importance of the children maintaining friendships across the cottages, particularly with technology such as Zoom helping the children to remain linked up. A highlight of the school week was our 'Friday meeting', which was held on Zoom and saw the children connecting and celebrating one another's learning successes. We also used Zoom to host a virtual raffle in aid of Macmillan Cancer Support. The children learned more about the isolation that increased across society as a result of lockdown. This allowed a natural opportunity for them to develop empathy for others, who they said needed help at this time. It also saw a rise in children noticing 'acts of kindness' between one another.

Within residential child care, the importance of rhythms, routines and rituals is key to the ebb and flow of community living and learning, and much more so at this time. Within the school calendar we celebrated the children 'Moving on Up' to our secondary school and ensured that sports day would go ahead, albeit without the normal valued presence of their parents and carers. Understanding and respecting the work of the NHS was a vital learning opportunity; the children showed their appreciation by making colourful posters and hanging them on the front gate, which was appreciated by our local community. Our children enjoyed coming out and hitting the pots and pans each Thursday evening, which also gave the cottage carers a brief chance to visually connect.

During lockdown, we had to be sensitive and adaptable to the needs of those experiencing a transition. Our skilled Assessment and Planning Workers supported the pre-admission stage by making a personalised 'virtual tour' to show the young children all about Harmeny in the absence of a physical visit.

Two young people moving on needed additional support to understand and cope with their delayed transition, which was supported well by the key relationships of the cottage carers who hung in with them to ensure a positive ending. That's what we do!

Our usual summer holiday trips were somewhat curtailed, but that didn't prevent the children from experiencing a local trip for a paddle and then an overnight camp in our custom-built camp site within the school grounds. Toasting marshmallows, drinking hot chocolate and staying up late created more positive childhood memories that will be cherished for years to come.

The young people continued to participate in recruitment, and as the candidates and fellow panel members were all attending virtually it allowed me to reflect on practice and see their vital involvement. I could observe their body language during responses from candidates, and this complemented their viewpoint when we were seeking their feedback.

From a national perspective, the children were aware of the impact of 'panic buying' as they were supported to understand the news. It was important for us to reassure them that we would continue to provide for them and promote mealtimes as an anchor within the life space. As part of the pedagogical approach to learning, literacy and numeracy were covered within baking activities and also reinforced that we had enough to provide for everyone.

We would normally have additional adults joining the groups at mealtimes, including members of our maintenance team. As we had to curtail the number of adults within the cottage to ensure social distancing, this meant that these key adults had to eat lunch elsewhere. Some of the children needed help to understand this and it showed the importance of the wider relationships in Harmeny that the children hold in high regard.

Further evidencing how relationships are key, one of our Homemakers had to undertake the meal preparation in the central kitchen, due to her own health needs. Instead of her normal daily in-house interactions with the children, it was replaced by them phoning to the main kitchen, or sending her over homemade pictures. They knew that she was there as she could still personalise each child's meal, which is crucial for the children to give a further sense of security.

She was very much held in mind by the children, who respected her need for physical distancing when she finally returned to the cottage to resume her

normal role. She still puts her face or hands against the glass so that the children can reciprocate. We are planning to make a plastic sheet with gloves so that the cuddles can return; that's what we do!

At a time of such anxiety, it remained of vital importance for the children to continue to experience physical reassurance and comfort from the carers. In consultation with Lothian Health Protection Team, we were advised that there was less need to physically distance from the young children and that PPE was not required in their homes unless in response to other protocols. One of our carers provided a personalised 'hairdressing service' for the children (and some adults). This would also be part of the cottage pamper nights along with foot spas and make-up.

This helped the children to understand that we too could be resilient and continue to provide for them. As the majority of children have attachment difficulties, the ongoing warmth, affection and close proximity from the adults helped them to cope exceptionally well.

Our connections with the wider community also gave the children a sense of being looked out for at a time when they could not take part in their normal clubs. Again, the use of technology allowed some to continue to participate and experience the 'new normal'. We helped the children to make memories by the bucket load; none more so than organising charity events in aid of others. The children were inspired by 'Captain Sir Tom<sup>2</sup>' and along with the supporting adults took part in laps around their cottage, stair climbing or wet sponge throwing at their favourite adults. Many events also generated an increase in intergenerational respect for others, wider communities and those less fortunate than themselves. One child said, 'There are people in need of *our* help.'

We continue to be inspired by those whom we care for.

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<sup>2</sup> Captain Sir Tom Moore, known for his achievements in raising over £32 million (worth almost £39 million with expected tax rebates) for charity in the run up to his 100<sup>th</sup> birthday during the Covid pandemic, by walking laps of his garden. He had set himself an initial target of £1,000.

## Reference

Emond, J., Steckley, L., & Roesch-Marsh, A. (2016). *A guide to therapeutic child care: What you need to know to create a healing home*. London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

## About the author

Craig Paul joined Harmeny as a residential child care worker in December 2000. He appreciated the opportunity to complete the SIRCC-sponsored route to gaining a BA Social Work (Residential Child Care Pathway) at Robert Gordon University, Aberdeen in 2006. Following 12 years as a residential manager, he secured the role of Head of Care in 2018. Craig values the responsibility he has within Harmeny to enable the children opportunities to experience the wonders of childhood and develop resilience and new talents for their future life and work.