

Residential child care in Scotland: Themes for practice since Another Kind of Home

Angus Skinner

Abstract

In this very personal account, Angus Skinner, former Chief Social Work Adviser to Scottish Ministers, and author of *Another Kind of Home* (1992), a review of residential child care in Scotland, considers enduring themes for practice and leadership. Along with good communication, good education, and training for staff and managers, he concludes that state care needs to develop the capacities to love and be loved.

Keywords

Residential child care, love, Who Cares? Scotland

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Introduction

We all crave the capacity to love and be loved. Each of us. Sustaining love is our greatest challenge in life. It is right therefore to place relationships at the heart of residential childcare.

We need to address a number of themes for practice, which should help in daily practice and in leadership. If leadership does not take practice seriously it is a failure of leadership. Let love be the first theme. I hope it may result in debate. Let none of us pretend that love is easy. We all need, every day, to keep learning how best to love – and to keep being open to being loved.

When in my pre-teenage years I was moved to a children's home I felt scared. I was not in local authority care. My parents were missionaries, and probably more usefully a teacher and a surgeon; they did great work. They felt a call to serve in Asia, more specifically India and what is now Pakistan, where I was born. Their close love for me in my early years, and later, leaves me even now as I approach seventy with a recognition of the importance of loving kindness in the world. Many others could tell similar stories. Those who have experienced

care in a children's home have a life-long physical memory in their stomachs of that entry moment. The memory of those questions. What love will I find here? Where do I truly belong. Who will help me create love in my life?

Quite a bit of my professional life has focussed on residential care of children. This was never consciously intended. Someone said to me a few years ago, 'I gather, Angus, that you once wrote a report on residential care for children but you have not done anything since'. Perhaps not much? – learning disability, sex offenders, women offenders, sensory impairment, national care standards, et al. Both *Another Kind of Home* and the National Care Standards had difficult starts, yet both have stood the tests of time. (Buffeting criticism comes naturally to someone whose family were fisher folk from the north of Scotland). So much of anyone's life quality depends on these crucial experiences and how we respond to them. As I promised in the foreword to *Another Kind of Home* (1992), I have kept returning to support care for children looked after by the state, in whatever setting.

It was joyous to trek Annapurna with Who Cares? Scotland. I thank the youngsters, and staff, for getting me round. The ground rules were simple. No alcohol, keep walking – step by step, bistarhi, bistarhi (slowly and carefully), no meat and no something else which I cannot recall. Cheerful bunch. Each day with its challenges and inspirations – from white dresses slopping in field toilets, to meditative sits and stances. As to climbing mountains? Well, that opened all our visions. Nepalese children running in flip-flops to and from school each day, probably twice as many miles as we walked in hiking gear. Enthusiasm and brightness in their eyes, eager to learn. We all, youngsters and staff, learnt from this.

Our youngsters were game for anything – the Bahrain first class lounge had some moments, not sure they are used to fish suppers on the steps. But that was the whole point of the trip –to send a message that 'there is nothing that is no for the likes of us'. Increasing university places – in the USA as well as the UK – similarly. Not everyone can do everything but we must no longer limit ambition. I was very proud of our staff and our young people in Nepal. Proud of how they learned, the openness and loving kindnesses they showed to all. And of course, their decision to help a local school find a supply of clean water, and then returned to help build it. Well done, well done indeed.

I wish I always felt such openness to learning was the heartbeat of Scottish public services.

Each looked after child in Scotland is unique, each with their strengths and challenges, each with their unique background circumstances. As knowledge, science and understanding of how best to care for children advances – as it does daily really – then all involved, staff, foster-carers, parents, teachers and children can build upward spirals of applying this knowledge and understanding.

Without good communication, without good education (which is what good training is) then progress will always be slow and stuttering.

Autism is a case in point. We know that many children in care have some form of autism (there are many autisms, many unidentified). We also know that there are dangers of over diagnosing autism. Great progress is being made in understanding autisms better. There is no blood test to diagnose autism, yet the condition in various forms has been recognised across the globe for centuries. We now know more about it than across the whole sum of previous knowledge. That will increase exponentially over the next decade or two. Which will rock many boats, not least those who thought they were in a safe harbour of already knowing.

I have resigned, appropriately, from all the many boards I was involved in as a trustee. Who Cares? Scotland know they can always call on me, though so admirably led and governed why should they? I have caring responsibilities, and it is time to retire. Or at least attend to other matters.

The one thing (you knew there would be a one thing) to re-enforce, if I may, is to recognise – in policy, statute and practice – the importance of love in people's lives. No-one can suggest that one person should love another. Most folk spend much of their lives thinking about love. That is the music we all listen to, the dramas, soap or high opera, we watch. The state cannot organise love. Yet it could end its failing to recognise love's importance in people's lives. If the state takes a child into care then it has the responsibility to ensure that those charged with that care provide support for developing the capacities to love and be loved, and also to recognise what love is not. All this could and should be in legislation. If the need for love, or at least its hope, is not openly addressed and talked through then inevitably young people will fall prey to damaging, desperate and odious alternatives.

So, in residential child care this will require training for staff and, doubtless in many cases, re-thinking training for managers. The key will be the middle-management layer. So come on the warriors to champion the case for recognising the importance of love in people's lives. If it is not recognised then it will be sought in desperation.

It is in the nature of the circumstances, whatever they are, that a child moving to stay in a children's home feels doubts about love. They may well, most do, feel strongly that – almost whatever has happened – they nonetheless love the parent they have been separated from. These feelings can be prolonged. Who Cares? Scotland has a remarkable skipping game that highlights the number of placements many looked after children have. The last time I saw it the skips reached 36 changes of placement, a real child.

Here are the leadership and management challenges. Stop the skipping. Recognise the importance of love in people's lives.

There are a number of other themes that need to be addressed in our practice. The ones that I have identified are therapy, leaving care, making sense, regulation, prospection, and hope. These are themes, not principles, because they require action. They require change in how we do things, at all levels, from daily practice to government policy and administration; from the political arena to academe. I am optimistic that these changes will be taken forward. If I can help I will. But this is a moment of passing the baton from one generation to another. I hope everyone taking the trouble to read the article finds it challenging enough to pick up the baton, and run with it in their responsibilities.

About the author

Angus Skinner is the author of *Another Kind of Home* (1992). He was for 15 years Chief Inspector of Social Work Services and Chief Adviser to Scottish Ministers. He spent some years of his childhood in a children's home and for his 60th birthday trekked the Annapurna with 25 children and young people who were or had been in care.

Reference

Skinner, A. (1992). *Another kind of home: A review of residential child care*. Edinburgh: HMSO/Scottish Office.

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