

Editorial

This year sees the tenth anniversary of SIRCC. Over the past ten years, there have been many changes in residential child care. This is, however, the defining feature of residential child care in Scotland. My first job in residential child care in Glasgow was in a large residential house in the South Side of Glasgow. The house was a large sandstone property and we had over 20 children in the unit. The age range went from 8 months old up to 18 years old. All bedrooms were shared, with 4-5 beds in each room. I was a 'houseparent' and the 'matron' lived onsite in a small bungalow in the garden. There were 3-4 staff on a typical shift. It sounds very alien nowadays but that's the way it was.

Looking back, some practitioners might be tempted to say that things have changed for the better. In some ways I would agree, but in some ways I would beg to differ. For me, there are two issues which have become markedly worse. One is in the area of healthy outdoor play. When I was a new 'houseparent', and it was a bright sunny day, we set off for the seaside with those children who wanted to come. The stultifying effect of risk-averse health and safety policies has reduced opportunities for children and young people to have new experiences. Such policies have also robbed staff of their ability to use their initiative and common sense. The other area is in the use of appropriate touch. Again, when I was a new 'houseparent' and a child was in distress, I would hug that child without a second thought. Now, we hear reports of 'no touch' policies and staff who are frightened to touch a child in any way, for fear of allegations being made against them. The ultimate losers in this are the children with whom we work.

One of the practice challenges for the next ten years will be to retain the positive features of practice and to revisit positive aspects of work from the past and bring them into current practice. We seem to operate in a culture which says we must keep changing in the name of 'continuous improvement'. If you don't believe me, think of your own organisation and how many changes it has undergone in the past ten years. Some change does indeed lead to improvement but I would contend that some changes do not and that a balance has to be struck.

I was prompted to think about this because I had the opportunity to visit Wallacewell Children's Home in Glasgow. This is an 18 bedded unit which has been graded as 'good' or 'very good' by the Care Commission over the past two years, and which received consistently positive reports before the grading system was in place. The size of this residential house seems 'old fashioned' yet it demonstrates positive practice again and again. It is hoped that the staff and young people at Wallacewell will work on an article for a future journal which will give us their own inside view as to what makes Wallacewell so special. Good practice is good practice, whether it reflects modern sensibilities or has a resonance with history.

Irene Stevens

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