

Editorial

Welcome to the Scottish Journal of Residential Child Care

One of the key skills in residential child care practice is assessment. In this edition of the journal, several writers have taken some aspect of assessment as their theme, be it risk assessment, assessment of new staff, or a tool for assessing the needs of care leavers. This prompted me to reflect on assessment in residential child care. In its broadest sense, assessment refers to the evaluation of a range of variables in the young person's life which then have an impact on their functioning. By highlighting strengths and pinpointing vulnerabilities, we can organise interventions which help our young people to develop resilience. But surely assessment is not just about the identification of discrete issues which become targeted as areas for improvement? Gestalt theorists such as Lewin (1935) would suggest that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts, especially when it comes to people and relationships. Certainly, by understanding the results of our assessments, we will have greater insight into the behaviour of the young people in our care. But it is wider than that. My reflections took me to a very old book I have by Larry Brendtro and Arlin Ness. I think the key message about assessment comes down to the fact that it must remain an organic and dynamic process. Brendtro and Ness (1983) talk about the need for assessment to be an 'ecological' process, encouraging an understanding of behaviour as part of the lifespace. However, the most important message from the book is the centrality of the worker to the process. As they say

The most effective assessment of the child's functioning ...is not made by a remote therapist but by an individual who is actively involved. Likewise the greatest influence in changing troubled children seldom comes from the 50 minute therapy session but rather from the adults and peers who are directly involved....in the other 23 hours. (Brendtro and Ness, 1983, p. 19)

For me, this means that assessment should never be undertaken for its own sake. Filling out forms and ensuring that paperwork is complete should not be an end in itself. The development of assessment systems and tools can help to direct work but they should be seen as complementary to the dynamic activity which happens at all points during those other 23 hours.

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References

Lewin, K. (1935) *A dynamic theory of personality*. New York: McGraw-Hill.

Brendtro, L. and Ness, A.E. (1983) *Re-educating troubled youth*. New York: Aldine.