

Care to Celebrate?

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In July 2003, the children's unit for over 12s in which I work celebrated its first birthday ... Yes, celebrated!

At first, however, the notion to celebrate this occasion did not sit easily with everyone.

Some of the young people were eager to have a birthday party, others were indifferent, given other pressing issues in their lives. There were certainly no objections to the idea and they were encouraged by hopes of a barbeque and an ample supply of 'munchies.'

When the idea was initially discussed at the staff team meeting, several concerns were voiced. First of all, who to invite? Young people and staff, obviously, but who else? The issue of inviting the neighbours was made difficult by the fact that many of them had signed a petition against the opening of the unit. Might it be seen as 'rubbing their noses' in the success of the unit and highlighting their misguided preconceptions about the young people who were to reside in the unit?

The answer to this question would certainly be 'yes' for the small number of our neighbours who still resented our presence in *their* local community and our alleged detrimental effect on their house prices. Set against this, a year down the line, we had many positive relationships with our neighbours. The young people had several friends within the local community; one young person had become best friends with the girl next door. The children from the family over the fence frequently played in our garden with young people and staff. This had led to one sixteen year old resident commenting, 'You know, when those kids are in here playing, it makes us look normal.'

We also considered whether inviting neighbours round to a celebration would be something a 'normal' family would do after living in a new house for a year. Would this contribute to the 'goldfish bowl effect' which all the young people had said they felt at some point, despite all attempts to make the unit 'blend in'? Would we be highlighting the fact we were not a normal 'family unit'? Some staff members made a valid counter-argument that there was no such thing as 'normal' in this situation. It was also argued that there are no benchmarks in

residential child care about things like this. Staff and young people in different units would have widely varying ideas about celebrations such as this.

This, then, was an opportunity for our young people and staff to set their own positive benchmark by having a birthday party. A suggestion was made to invite a few select neighbours as an opportunity to say thank you, in a subtle way, for giving us a chance and for not pre-judging us. Further concerns were raised, however, about how too many adults coming might be intimidating, or even embarrassing. Or it might create an unsettling environment with which young people might not cope well.

Discussion then turned to inviting the young people's families. This again raised a number of questions. Certainly most young people had family members who could attend, but what about those who did not? How would young people feel if their families did not turn up or could not make it? Would the young person be let down or feel left out? A couple of the young people's parents also had issues with substance misuse; what if they came to the unit under the influence as had happened on previous occasions? It was argued that it would be better to go ahead and invite everyone and deal with situations if and when they occurred, rather than assume the worst and invite no family members at all. Another concern looked at it from the families' perspective; how would family members feel attending a birthday party to celebrate a year that their child had been living away from their care? Could this have damaging effects? The council for the prosecution seemed to be gathering insurmountable evidence against having the birthday party.

I remember thinking at the time that we were over-analysing a straightforward idea for a birthday party and becoming bogged down in too much detail (as seems to be all too often a problem in residential child care). It also seemed quite daunting that this experienced staff group and management team seemed so determined to find a whole array of reasons why it was not a good idea. I even began to question whether I was being naive and unrealistic about the whole thing because of my comparative inexperience as a residential worker. I hasten to add that this was short lived!

In the end, however, a compromise was reached. Given the mounting list of potential problems linked to inviting neighbours or family members, it was decided that the birthday party would best be celebrated, on this occasion, solely by young people and staff.

This having been decided, the discussion suddenly ventured into deeper, murkier waters. Questions were raised about the essence of residential child care and whether its very existence was to be seen as something positive or negative in the lives of its service users. What would we be celebrating anyway?

Personally, I thought the list was endless. I believed we were celebrating a year of positive achievements in the lives of five young people. The same five young people and almost the same staff group had lived and worked together for a full year. For some, this had been a year of stability, progress and positive relationships among young people, their families and workers. This stability and continuity was, in itself, a tremendous achievement given the often chaotic system for young people who had even more individually chaotic lives. Some of the young people nurtured a sense of pride and ownership within the unit, given that they were the first residents of this brand new building. They had chosen the décor and furnishings, and had been the first people in their bedrooms.

They had also been the first ambassadors of 'looked after and accommodated young people' in this close-knit community. This was an understated, yet hugely important, role they had undertaken solely by virtue of their placement here and which they had carried out with great courage, resilience and dignity, often in the face of blatant prejudice.

Looking back, perhaps the underlying reason for the feelings of discomfort among staff members about the birthday celebrations was far more fundamental than we wanted even to acknowledge. We were celebrating 'care', a word, in social work terms, often associated with negativity, loss, unhappiness, and hopelessness; linked back to Dickensian images of institutions.

When the day came, however, we challenged these misguided and stereotypical ideas and we focused on the positives, the happiness and hope in our celebration.

The young people made and distributed individual 'Winnie the Pooh' invitations. With help from the staff, they decorated inside the unit with balloons and home-made 'Happy Birthday' banners. Despite the summer rain, with the aid of parasols, umbrellas and carrier bags as 'rain mates', we had a barbeque with a great buffet. All of the young people and those staff who made the effort to attend really seemed to enjoy themselves. We have the photos to prove it.

Reflecting upon the day's events, I hope the other staff who took part felt the same sense of pride and motivation in their work as I know that I did on that day. Perhaps most importantly, I hope the young people will always have that day to look back on and remember as a positive part of their 'care' experience. We all definitely took a small step on that day in the direction of highlighting and believing in residential child care as a positive choice for all involved.

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