

Appreciating Residential Child Care Workers as Attachment makers changes everything

Residential Child Care Workers are Attachment makers.

Children are Attachment takers.

Knowing this we need to ensure we 'make' so children can 'take'.

This is a root understanding of what we are aiming for in recruitment. We need to work with people who can

- make relationships – can provide for a child that all important unbroken feeling connection that is empathy;
- are resourceful – endlessly creative;
- are resilient - possess stickability and emotional stamina, who can sustain themselves in a situation of adversity;
- are reflective, in seeing beyond behind and before behaviour.

It is much misunderstood that Attachment comes from the communication and interaction from the grown-up to and with the child. Continuity of care giving is all important. Establishing a secure attachment is essential. It is the primary task, that which cannot be compromised. It takes time. (See the NCERCC download - Attachment and the stages of a placement)

Relationship focussed working is personal, the person's capacities, self and what they do matters.

A healthy turnover in a residential setting has been held as 10% of staff per year refreshes the team. Why is that and why does each leaving need to be planned?

It is based on the understanding of Attachment and the Secure Base as the primary task.

There is an old and wise RCC saying that, 'You can only leave one your key child has left'.

The reason being that your key child may have moved, or rather been moved, and never had the experience of it being for a good reason because of personal growth.

They have never had the full experience, beginning, middle and end, of the secure emotional base provided by that dependable, reliable, consistent good-enough parent.

If they move on from you they are given the opportunity to take that completed experience with them.

If you leave then it is another broken Attachment cycle that confirms their expectation of you and all grown-ups as predicted and tested in the time you were together from their 'internal working mechanism' as Bowlby called it.

When a child comes to live in your home then it needs to be set out to be a different experience.

Recruitment is concerned with the continuity of care

Is this being recognised? In researching this analysis we looked at 2 recent reports – the Children’s Homes Association State of the sector 2023, and the Ofsted annual report 2023.

Children’s Homes Association State of the sector 2023

[CHA publishes results of the 2023 State of the Sector Survey - The Children’s Homes Association \(the-cha.org.uk\)](https://www.the-cha.org.uk/cha-publishes-results-of-the-2023-state-of-the-sector-survey-the-childrens-homes-association)

Reflection

Turnover - consider the figures of page 32 in the context of the above considerations about Attachment.

Reflection

Vacancies - consider the figures on page 34 in the context of the above considerations about Attachment.

Reflection

Consider the on the title page in the context of the above considerations about Attachment.

Ofsted annual report 2023

[Education, Children’s Services and Skills 2022/23 \(publishing.service.gov.uk\)](https://www.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/115442/education-childrens-services-and-skills-2022-23.pdf)

Reflect on the summary (page 112) in the context of the above considerations about Attachment.

In 2022–23, 35% of permanent care staff in children’s homes left their role and 42% were newly hired. Although these rates are similar to previous years, local authorities and providers report that many staff, particularly those in roles that require low or no qualifications, are leaving for better paid jobs in other industries. Those with more qualifications are moving to agency work that offers higher pay. Very high turnover creates instability for children and reduces the chances of building the relationships that are important for children’s well-being and sense of belonging

Culture

Cultures influence attitudes; attitudes influence behaviour. In *Varieties of Residential Experience* the authors examined the ‘ethos’ and culture of residential settings, and their impacts on staff and residents. They identified four key dimensions:

- *ideological*: the prevailing values and beliefs as implemented by staff and managers
- *organisational*: the way aims and values are enshrined in structures and staff roles

- *staffing*: the characteristics, training and attitudes of staff
- *residents' responses*: for example, whether there is learning or socialisation.

Leadership is an important factor in determining the culture of collaborative group living.

What Works in Residential Child Care

http://www.ncb.org.uk/ncercc/ncercc%20practice%20documents/whatworksinrccsummary_ncbhighlight.pdf

Clear and coherent leadership is a fundamental component of high-quality practice. The role of the head of a home is influential in determining the quality of care and that everyone understands the purpose of the home.

Ofsted annual report 2023 re leadership of children's homes

Page 112 *At year end, 12% of children's homes did not have a registered manager in post. Of those with a registered manager, 40% had a manager who had been in post for less than a year.*

What is the reason people stay in RCC?

Studies in England and Scotland agree on the 3 most important aspects.

[ScotJournal ResChldCare3 \(celcis.org\)](#)

['Nae too bad': Job Satisfaction and Staff Morale in Scottish Residential Child Care \(strath.ac.uk\)](#)

- Children's progress
- Pride in their job
- Teamwork

What are factors that keep RCCWS? Making a resilient retention environment.

- Personal and professional development – opportunities to progress continuous professional development
- Pay
- Terms and conditions.

Where these are in place this makes a difference. These go to make a resilient retentive environment.

What is the reason people leave RCC?

Mainey's research advised people feel pulled rather than pushed. Where the factors above become thinner there is less resilience, less 'bouncebackability', there comes a point where a choice is made.

The effect on the culture needs appreciating.

Employee disengagement is a leading cause of high worker turnover.

Culture carriers are generally additional to the formally defined leadership people.

They are crucial as they have the knowledge and experience to identify and assist disengaging co-workers reaching out to them providing peer-to-peer support, telling them their contributions are recognised and valued.

A culture carrier possesses institutional knowledge, they're an embodiment of the home's values, they show others the practice, having the 'know-how' they are someone others want to be around. For any home identifying and supporting your culture carriers is indispensable.

The above situation is not new.

See page 19 - 20.

[Children's homes workforce literature review \(publishing.service.gov.uk\)](https://publishing.service.gov.uk)

That it has not changed in a changing world is increasingly worrying.

Social Care Wales (2017) concluded more work is needed to understand why so many workers choose not to remain in their roles if recruitment and retention are to be addressed successfully.

The Narey report (Residential care in England. Report of Sir Martin Narey's independent review of children's residential care. London: Department for Education) concluded a key challenge in recruiting staff is appointing people able to withstand the pressure of the work, and the challenges posed by children who will sometimes behave poorly.

Support and professional development – common factors in the quality of service

Research conducted by Unison in 2016 explored the issue of professional development in more detail. Their analysis of data from both adult and children's care homes found staff support to be a common factor determining the quality of service. Poor supervision, poor training, and poor management were common issues among inadequate care homes across both sectors, while those with high ratings were significantly better in these areas. The report noted that common problems in children's homes that required improvement include poor risk management and unsatisfactory recruitment processes.

Their summary of the evidence included:

- The need to create a positive culture in homes supported by strong leadership, trained staff and clear policies to be balanced with keeping the resident at the heart of care;
- The workforce is key to the effective delivery of care and while learning from other settings was limited in this area, some key approaches may prove useful;

- Continuing support for staff is critical; the evidence at organisational, team and individual levels could help residential care providers identify gaps in their staff support provision.

A report for the DfE published in 2015 summarised the key findings from research into the qualifications, skills and training requirements of staff working in children's homes (White, C., Gibb, J., Graham, B., Thornton, A., Hingley, S., & Mortimer, E. Training and developing staff in children's homes: research report. London: Department for Education.)

- Induction followed by in-house training is necessary to equip staff with the necessary skills and expertise to meet the needs of children and young people;
- Training provides staff with a better understanding of the issues affecting young people and the theory behind their practice;
- Shadowing, supervision and feedback from home managers, other senior staff and external specialists are crucial to the learning process;
- Training is more likely to be effective if it is rooted in the work of a particular home and young people living there;
- Individual homes should ideally have a training strategy integrating all learning and development activities. That strategy should be tailored to staff at different levels, with different learning styles and needs; and
- Ongoing training is likely to be more effective when delivered in person and adopts an interactive style.

However, Unison report found that fewer than half (44%) of children's residential care staff surveyed felt the training they got was always relevant to meeting young people's needs. Many felt their training was too basic or generic, but some warned there was a lack of training in key areas such as self-harm and sexual exploitation.

A series of studies in Portugal identified that post induction residential child care staff need to be equipped with effective child behaviour management strategies especially where the people have little or no prior child care experience. An in-service specific training enabled them to better cope with the young residents' behaviour difficulties by gaining knowledge and skills related to empathy, positive parenting and affection. However, a twelve-month follow-up study suggested early gains were not sustained. The authors suggested that support and training may need to be provided to caregivers on a regular and ongoing basis. (Silva, I. S. (2018). Therapeutic parents: Evaluation of the adequacy of the incredible years basic parent programme in the promotion of professional skills and reduction of behavioural problems of children in residential care. Dissertation Abstracts International Section C: Worldwide, 75(1-C))

The DfE revisited the matter in 2021, a report for DfE summarising the findings from 37 papers and reports into a narrative synthesis. [Children's homes workforce literature review \(publishing.service.gov.uk\)](https://www.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/94444/childrens-homes-workforce-literature-review.pdf)

A qualitative Australian study (Moore, T., McArthur, M., Death, J., Tilbury, C., & Roche, S. (2018). Sticking with us through it all: The importance of trustworthy relationships for children and young people in residential care. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 84, 68-75) asked children for their views on the characteristics of workers that helped them to feel safe in a residential placement. They identified competent and trustworthy staff as essential. Children wanted care workers to be caring, proactive, tenacious in building relationships, and available. They valued carers who listened and ensured young people had a voice. The authors concluded their results affirmed the central role of the worker-client alliance in ensuring residential care is a positive and safe experience for children and young people and identified structural factors that children and young people believe are barriers to them feeling safe. They included:

- Lack of stability;
- Hesitation of young people to forge relationships;
- Lack of faith that workers would or could effectively respond; and
- Competing priorities.

Reflection

DfE Children's Workforce review – a draft theory of change page 40

[Children's homes workforce literature review \(publishing.service.gov.uk\)](https://publishing.service.gov.uk)

To what degree has this happened?

Recruitment and retention need to be focussed on the creation and sustaining of positive organisational cultures and increase relationship-based care to improve the quality of care.

An aspect of the above we need to now take into account is Residential Child Care in a period of economic stringency. It is essential that homes are people focussed. If the available funds are reduced, through reduced fees or increased profit taking, what is the effect on the emotional resilience of Residential Child Care Workers? What is the effect? A reduction in relationship making is to be consciously avoided as 'that is what we came here to do'.

Vicarious trauma is an inevitable everyday occurrence in interactions. It is understood, contained, and responded to within a resilient environment.

This requires the environment be resilient, rich and facilitating, supportive. There are deleterious effects of it becoming performative. This is vicarious trauma too. What is the effect if a person feels a disparity between meeting the needs of a child and the work of an under-resourced home? Is anyone thinking like this? It is essential risk management.

When does a reduction in ability to meet needs become unmanageable personally and professionally?

It is the amount of funding that is present in the relationship that matters.

The unshakeable focus needed is the ability of a worker/home to provide the long-term, time and resource-intensive work that each child needs.

The inability to be able to meet this threshold results in anxiety, low confidence in work, and dissatisfaction with the outcomes. The above shows many reasons why this must be avoided. A worker struggling personal and professionally has to reserve some of the resources for their own survival and this creates a gap in communication with the child.

Exhorting more is not the answer. 'Sweating the assets is detrimental'.

If we run out of 'ordinary magic' – what then?

The looming situation is one of organisational responsibility not one of individual resilience.

This work towards resolving the issue involves the whole system, policy makers, providers, practitioners.

All of us are the environment which will provide the circumstances for Attachment to grow.

Reflection

Imagine a children's services rooted in Attachment – how would it be different? How do we get there?

The Theory of Change may be long, but we will learn a lot as we walk the talk.