
Positive and stable relationships with professionals involved in their care are key to promoting more positive outcomes for looked after children and young people.

This paper draws on the findings of two Irish studies that explore the practice of keyworking in residential child care practice from the perspectives of both care workers and care leavers. Grounded in ‘relationship-based practice’ (Ruch et al, 2010), the practice of keyworking acknowledges that relationships are a fundamental human need. Research suggests that young people’s relational experience has profound effects on their social-emotional development, personality formation and social competence (Howe, 1998). Keyworking includes both co-ordination of individual care plans as well as developing and maintaining trusting relationships with young people (Mallinson, 1992). Byrne and McHugh (2005) highlight as primary the role the keyworker plays in helping the young person ‘make sense’ of the experience of living in residential care settings.

### The importance of relationship-based practice

The studies reveal a consistent acknowledgement of the importance of forming constructive and supportive relationships between caregivers and young people in residential care. All of the participants acknowledged that it is at the heart of their practice:

> It’s key [the relationship], you couldn’t do the work if you didn’t have relationships with them, the house would be in crisis and chaos... it’s what it comes down to. It’s so hard to do any sort of work if you don’t, there is no trust or respect or anything there.

Care providers consistently highlighted the importance of generating a nurturing environment which helped young people develop a sense of belonging, even in short-term and crisis intervention services. Keyworking was viewed as a useful method of providing continuity and a sense of belonging for the young person:

> We are his family, his memories, the past, his identity, his support, unconditionally, this is his home.

The narrative of this young person reflected this potent bond with his residential unit:

> This is my home, this will always be my home. They are my family life ‘cos they are always here if they say they are going to be.

The provision of aftercare was also highly valued by the participating care workers and care leavers.

### Key factors for building successful relationships

The key factors contributing to successful relationships with young people in residential care included:

- the environment of the residential unit
- the amount of time devoted to building relationships
- professionals’ traits including their skills and knowledge, personality, genuineness and respect for the young person, as experienced by the young person.

Participants viewed personal characteristics as enabling staff and young people to develop unique relationships, and arranged the matching of a key worker and young person accordingly:

> Eventually the child will identify someone, more often than not that they just enjoy being around, that they get something from, be it their humour or maybe the nurturing that they receive that they are comfortable with. So from there, that sort of first light attachment, that’s where it starts.

### Challenges to building relationships

Lack of consultation regarding change of keyworker or not being included in the decision about who would be their keyworker was one factor young people reported as inhibiting the relationship. Other reasons included:

- previous abusive relationships in their earlier lives
- staff turnover
- multiple placement disruptions experienced over a relatively short time period
- keyworker gender – both male and female care leavers reported incidences of being assigned keyworkers of the opposite gender to their own, and for a variety of reasons finding this a difficult.

Social care workers also identified that the developmental stage of young people can serve as a challenge to forming positive relationships, as well as the experiences that young people bring with them into the unit.

### Conclusions

- Relationship-based practice is critical for residential care workers
- The young person must lead the choice of keyworker - the process of matching keyworker to young people is critical to its success
- Care workers must be supported to understand their personal traits and how they define the keyworking relationship
- Care workers must be supported in their role to constantly strive to create an environment where quality relationships can evolve.

### References


