'BANDWAGON': LISTENING TO CHILDREN

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'Bandwagon'n (US): wagon on which a band rides at the head of a procession; climb on the B. (coll) secure an important position by throwing in one's lot with a successful party (Penguin English Dictionary, 1972).

UNFORTUNATELY, THERE have always been bandwagons in social work - psychodynamics' specialism, family therapy - and of course, more recently, the identification and treatment of child sexual abuse. This is not to say that the enthusiasm and commitment that some social workers have shown in using the latest knowledge and skills to help people who have experienced, and are experiencing horrendous abuses and disadvantage, are not to be commended. The inquiry into even more areas of damage and deprivation, some of which could not have been envisaged only a few years ago, has meant that those individuals brave enough and determined enough to tackle some of the issues have needed to explore new territory and pioneer ideas hitherto unknown. The need for shared learning and support through working and meeting together is also crucial. However, there has never been a shortage of those who, very quickly, have recognised 'a procession' and have attempted to establish an important position 'by' throwing in their lot so that they can be associated with 'a successful party'. On the horizon, I see a new procession forming - communicating with or working directly with children.

Recognition of the need for more direct work with children, and attempts at responding to that need, have featured regularly over the years, often in official reports following child deaths and in the social work press. In a sensitively argued paper in 1977, Winnicott (1977) wrote:

As I see it, if we could only learn to respond effectively to children at the crisis point in their lives which brings them to us, and at subsequent crisis points which are part of growth, we might save many of them from becoming clients in one capacity or another for the rest of their lives.

More recently, in 1988 the Cleveland Enquiry Report (1988) suggested that:

Those who work in this field must have an empathy with children. Professionals should always listen carefully and take seriously what the child has to say.

Over the past few years I have been part of the 'procession'. Not, I stress, in an effort to 'throw in one's lot with a successful party' but as someone who found himself, with others, 'at the head of the procession' and struggling to respond effectively to the pain and suffering experienced by those children with whom I have worked. Some of my time has been spent contributing towards the training of other professionals in working directly with children. On those occasions I have been impressed by the accounts I have heard of work being undertaken already by dedicated staff who are often hard-pressed to respond to the increasing demands placed upon them by their adult clients. However, on many occasions I have been concerned about those individuals, and their managers, who entertain the notion that there is in existence the A to Z of Techniques for Working with Children.
'Give me the techniques' they say 'and I will go away and use them'. If only that were so. By, perhaps, inadvertently adopting an attitude which would be an insult to other client groups, those who expect to achieve results with children in this way are either so intent upon getting onto the 'bandwagon', or are so pressurised by the demands made upon them or are so naive that they are oblivious to the barriers which need to be overcome, before even embarking upon work directly with the child. Let us examine some of these barriers.

In social work training, some emphasis is still placed upon preparing and supporting those exposed to emotionally damaged and socially deprived individuals to prevent them becoming swamped by the power of the systems and emotions involved. When working with children, the strength of such feelings can be inhibiting or, at worst, devastating for those involved in trying to help. In 1976, Moore wrote:

Communicating therapeutically with a child can resurrect within the adult feelings repressed, the full strength of which is often overwhelming. It is hard to bear the sheer horror of the pain and suffering that some of our very young child-clients have experienced at their tender age.

Techniques focusing upon engaging children and eliciting information do not necessarily help in such situations. Efforts are needed before meeting children, to carry out some 'self work' - exploring one's own attitudes to children and getting in touch with our own childhood experiences -before being exposed to their trauma. Such explorations can be initiated in training and continued later in one's career through discussion with colleagues. Despite protests by some training course participants (a few of whom may be already indicating that the barriers are too difficult to overcome), I have found that this kind of preparation is vital and can contribute a great deal towards the success of their later work.

The attitudes we adopt towards children need also to be explored in other ways. Franklin (1986) wrote:

Children because of their age are denied rights which as adults we consider to be basic human rights ...... Children form a large, long-suffering and oppressed grouping in our society.

Children's rights are back on the public agenda and it is not for me to expand here upon the wide range of issues involved in this area of study. It suffices to say that, until we learn to acknowledge children and young people in our society as individuals, those involved in working with them will, to one degree or another, continue to reflect the disrespect and prejudice that our society portrays.

'Understanding the meaning' is an aspect of work with children which is fraught with difficulty. Most of us are aware that a child's concept of time, depending on their age and development, is different from that of an adult's. 'Before' can mean yesterday, last week or last year, depending on circumstances. Words are not necessarily an easy mode of communication for adults, and children usually communicate primarily through play. This has major resource implications as far as supervisors and managers of staff involved in working with children are concerned. The allocation of time, play materials and support has to be looked at from a child focused point of view. The number of times I have heard of the total absence of
premises and materials for working with children are numerous. I am told by many social work practitioners that playing with children is regarded by their organisations as a low priority, even by some child welfare agencies. Staff, in their commitment to the work, build up their own stock of play materials and can even be expected to supply less adequately prepared colleagues, usually five minutes before an interview with a child when to deny the request would be to deny the child. The myth that an extensive array of expensive materials is needed for effective work with children needs to be destroyed. They do deserve the best but that does not always mean the most costly. Family centre staff can teach managers a thing or two in this respect and the sooner that is acknowledged the better, in relation to the time children need, the materials required, and the availability of suitable premises.

It is not surprising that, when faced with an increased demand for more planned, ongoing direct work with children, those responsible for carrying out the task have found themselves in a position whereby they are required to acquire the necessary skills, with little or no recognition of the need to overcome some of the blocks already identified.

The problem can be compounded by the fact that supervisors often have no training in overseeing this kind of work. Training for them, as it has been for supervisors, is in short supply. In addition, we do not always use the listening skills we have learned and developed with adults and, before rushing into trying to learn new skills, we need to listen to what our child and adolescent clients have told us so far.

In an increasingly child-hating society where our dislike of children is never far from the surface, we need to pause and reflect before clamouring for more information. Many workers involved with children genuinely believe they listen to children. Given the opportunity through training (had specialist training is necessary) to become aware of their feelings and attitudes, they can realise their shortcomings. Effective listening is about giving yourself the provision to hear, and to do that requires an acknowledgement of self and personal experience so that these are negotiated and managed by the individual, rather than that they control and direct the professional role. Hopefully, we can then be more receptive to building upon existing skills, without, the anxiety of believing we need to learn about a whole range of new techniques.

References


Report Of The Inquiry Into Child Abuse In Cleveland. (1988), HMSO.
