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Authors	Jenkinson, Hilary
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UCC
University College Cork, Ireland
Coláiste na hOllscoile Corcaigh

Working Effectively with Adolescents

This article explores the processes involved in adolescent development and the implications for social workers in engaging and working effectively with this client group. Working with teenagers can be both a challenging and rewarding process. This paper highlights the importance of investing the time, energy, and resources into, building relationships with young people; listening to them; involving them in decision making; empowering them; and adequately preparing them for independent living. Practice which reflects these principles will contribute to, and compliment, the natural developments which occur during the young person's journey through adolescence.

"How many social workers does it take to change a light-bulb?
None…social workers don't change anything"

This joke, told by a young service user, reflects the antipathy often felt by teenaged clients towards social workers. This paper aims to identify ways in which we can improve our working relationships with teenagers and contribute towards effective and positive change in their lives.

Working with teenagers is widely recognised as being one of the more challenging aspects of social work practice (Laycock 1970, Jones and Pritchard 1980, Jenkinson 1997). Many social workers feel well prepared and equipped to work with children and families, yet when it comes to working with adolescents may feel at a bit of a loss in terms of engaging with them and building an effective working relationship. Unfortunately social work, as a profession, does not have a very good record when it comes to working with this age group. A study commissioned by the Department of Health in England criticises workers' ability to engage with teenagers and claimed that "Professionals working with teenagers are failing to support them adequately…There was much evidence throughout this study of social workers' failure to achieve this meaningful level of engagement…and the level of contact between social workers and teenagers was surprisingly low" • HMSO *Focus on Teenagers* (Community Care 27 June-3 July 1996).

Another report jointly published by the NSPCC and Centrepoint in the U.K. also criticises the way many social workers deal with young people on the run from home:

> "As young people get older they do not feel respected or consulted about the decisions made about their lives…(they) constantly complain of not being listened to, not being taken seriously… (and) their needs and views are being ignored" (Community Care 27 June-3 July 1996)

This article examines how developing an understanding of adolescence as a developmental phase in the life cycle can contribute significantly to the quality of work undertaken with teenagers. In doing so the author considers some of the most important themes emerging in the study of adolescence in the 1990s.

Useful concepts in understanding adolescence:

"Adolescence" comes from the Latin word "adolescere" which means 'to grow up'. It is a time when a young person experiences rapid development in the emotional, social, physical and intellectual spheres. According to Meyerson, "this period is accompanied by probably more changes than at any other time of life" (1975 p.41). It can be a time of major upheaval and adjustment for teenagers in general, so how much more so for those young people whose life circumstances bring them into contact with social work services? It is crucial therefore for social workers to have an understanding of the process of adolescence and the tasks associated with this phase of the life cycle. A lack of understanding in this regard can hinder the worker's relationship with the adolescent and thus limit the effectiveness of the work carried out.

According to Hollin (1988 p.2), adolescence is "a stage of development characterised by change: biological change, psychological change, and social change". These aspects of development are closely related to, and have influence on each other. Let us examine each of these areas in turn, identifying the types of change that occur in each one, and highlighting the implications for social work intervention with the young person.

Psychological change: The primary psychological task during adolescence is the construction of a new self-concept. This entails young people revising their opinion of themselves in order to take account of the radical changes that they are experiencing and involves a reassessment of the individual's identity. Central to this process is the concept of self-esteem which has been described by Rosenberg as the "overall negative or positive attitude toward self" (cited in Coleman and Hendry 1990 p.53). The individual's self esteem can be very volatile during adolescence and according to Hollin; "With the evaluation of the self undergoing various changes during adolescence, the adolescent's self-esteem can rise and fall over relatively short periods of time" (1988 p.8). Ideally the transition through adolescence would result in the young person having a positive sense of themselves and thus having a relatively high level of self esteem as this contributes centrally to a persons overall well being (Coleman and Hendry 1990 p.53).

It is very important for social workers to work with these natural psychological processes that occur during adolescence and support the development of a positive self-image. Self-esteem may be fostered by respect, being valued, being consulted, being listened to, and receiving the message; 'you are important, your views and opinions matter, your welfare is paramount'. However, as we saw earlier, far too often young people are not consulted or listened to by social workers and therefore do not experience being valued or important in that process.

Also in the psychological realm the adolescent is gradually gaining a sense of control over his or her own life and decisions. According to Harter (1983) control, or feelings of internal responsibility for outcomes is a core element contributing to an individual's self esteem (cited in Coleman and Hendry 1990 p.54). This is of central relevance to the social worker's involvement with young people as many young people working with social workers feel they have little or no control over what happens to them and they are not involved in the decisions that are often life changing for them. It has been asserted that professionals working with teenagers should "try to provide the means by which individual young people can regain control over their lives" (Dalrymple, 1997 p.82). In

the context of social work this highlights the importance of involving young people centrally in the decisions effecting them. This same author outlines five benefits of involving young people in decision making:

1. Involving young people in decision making increases their sense of identity and self-esteem.

2. If young people have been involved in the making of a decision, they have a sense of "ownership" and emotional investment in positive outcomes, which means plans are more likely to succeed.

3. Even if consultation does not lead to the outcome the young person would have preferred, participation in the decision-making process can still leave a young person with positive feelings.

4. It is possible to allow young people to have an input into the decision-making process without burdening them with the responsibility for making the decision.

5. The young person's perspective may encourage adults, or agencies, to think more flexibly or consider a wider range of alternatives.

(Dalrymple 1997 p. 86)

The case for involving teenagers in decision making is compelling. It may take extra time, energy and involve some element of "risk" but I believe the benefits both in terms of the young person's development and well being, and engaging in good practice, far outweigh these costs.

Social change: Adolescence is a time of considerable social change when a young person moves from a relative state of dependence during childhood, to the independence of adulthood. This transition involves considerable re-negotiation of relationships for the adolescent, leading towards relating to adults as equals.

During adolescence, the young person gradually gains autonomy from their family of origin and becomes a self-sufficient individual. This is not a simple process and can be the source of much anxiety and conflict during the teenage years as parents and carers try to balance their concern for the young person's welfare against the need for the teenager

to develop independence (Hollin 1988). According to Havinghurst "Assuming membership in the larger community" is a key task of adolescence and involves the young person recognising their roles and responsibilities to a community as an individual in their own right. This has obvious implications for young people who are social work clients, who in many instances are in care. Much has been written on the difficulties faced by young people as they make the transition from care to independent living (Biehal et al. 1995, Broad 1998). Some of the issues involved in this transition are: adequate preparation and planning; on going support; access to and support for education/training; financial support; housing needs; and participation by young people in service planning. Social workers have a responsibility to ensure that the young people they are working with receive adequate preparation for leaving the care situation and sufficient support for living independently.

The acquisition of power, status and rights associated with adulthood is an integral part of the social change that occurs during adolescence. However according to Dalrymple, many young people's experience of dealing with adult professionals has been one of powerlessness and even oppression (1997). She claims that "until adults recognise that they can and do oppress children and young people it is not possible to promote change"(1997 p.81). How can social workers actively aim to empower the young people they work with? The centrality of consultation, listening to young people and involving them in decision making has already been argued in this article. Another aspect of this process is ensuring the young person is aware of his/her rights. A lack of awareness in this regard can lead to "status ambiguity" and according to Coleman et al "If the individual's status is ambiguous, and if his or her rights are not clearly defined, then inevitably he or she will lack the power to influence events and take control of his or her life" (in Roche and Tucker 1997 p.227). It is essential that the young person is informed by the social worker of their rights in relation to the social work process itself (i.e. the right to read their files). The social worker should also be in a position to inform the young person of their rights regarding wider issues such as those pertaining to entitlements or legal issues. The social worker may not have the specialist knowledge required and in such instance could find out the information or refer the young person

appropriately. The importance of having a knowledge of ones rights is reinforced by Berlins who states:

> "Once you know what your rights are you've got your little bit of soil on which you stand. You're not just a free floating subject…your someone who has to be listened to" (Berlins 1997, p.81).

Thus being proactive in informing a young person of their rights is central to good social work practice with young people and will contribute positively to the journey they are negotiating through adolescence.

Another aspect of the adolescent process is the transition from relating to adults as "superiors" to relating to them as equals. It is widely recognised that the most effective work with young people is based on the principles of participation and partnership (Smith 1980, Staunton 1996, Jeffs and Smith 1987), whereby young people have ownership of, and are equal partners in the process. These principles meet obvious obstacles when placed in the context of statutory social work, where power rests firmly with the local authorities and young people certainly aren't equal partners in the process. According to Britton:

> "The policies and practices of local authority departments allow for only very limited participation by young people in what are often critical decisions about their future. As a result, many youngsters view the decisions made about them as arbitrary or unfair" (1987 p.35).

Social work departments will vary in their commitment to participatory practice in relation to young people; however the greater the investment made in engaging young people as partners in the process, while acknowledging the statutorily prescribed boundaries and responsibilities of the social worker, the greater the returns will be in terms of effective intervention and successful outcomes. Developing this type of working relationship requires time; a commodity all too scarce in a social worker's schedule. However if working with teenagers is to be effective then the time it requires needs to be prioritised.

Biological change: During puberty the adolescent experiences rapid and dramatic changes in his/her body due to an increase in the activity of growth-related hormones and sex hormones. This involves the development of sexual organs, bodily hair, growth increase, breast development and the onset of periods (for a girl), and the voice breaking and nocturnal emissions or "wet dreams" (for a boy). The purpose of these developments is to allow the individual to be able to function sexually and to reproduce. Adapting to these changes represents a considerable challenge for most young people and according to Havinghurst, accepting the changes in one's own body is a principle task of adolescence (in Neilson 1987 p.19). For some young people the changes that occur during this time and the associated sexual developments are the cause of much bewilderment and anxiety. Effective sex education and open relationships with adults (usually parents), whereby a young person can discuss issues around sexuality and relationships are vital in helping the young person negotiate their way through this new, often emotionally charged terrain.

What implications does this have for social work? A recent study carried out by the Sex Education Forum in Britain shows that young people in care do not feel prepared when it comes to the areas of sex education and relationships (Frances and Love in *The Guardian* 3/2/1999). Many of these young people do not have the kinds of relationships with their parents that allows for discussion of these topics and care workers do not feel equipped to provide effective sex and relationships education. These young people are missing out on key preparation for the biological changes that occur during adolescence and accompanying development of sexual relationships. Social workers have a role in ensuring that the young people in care for whom they have responsibility are being adequately prepared in this regard; whether that be through liaison with care workers or through direct work with the teenagers themselves.

Conclusion

This article has outlined the developmental processes which occur during adolescence, and has identified ways in which social workers working with this client group can work

with those processes rather than against them. To achieve high quality work with teenagers takes commitment, energy, time and resources. These latter two factors are often scarce commodities in social work; however if the work we carry out is to be of benefit to young people then there needs to be considerable investment in building up trusting, respectful relationships; helping to develop their self esteem; *really* involving them in decision making; empowering them; and ensuring they are adequately equipped to assume independent adult roles and intimate relationships. I believe these factors are essential prerequisites to good practice with adolescents, not optional extras.

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