

# The Importance of Fulfilling Staff Needs in Children's Homes

By Daniel Jones

## *Abstract*

*This article looks at new considerations in running residential children's homes and the effects on the management, staff and children, focusing on the importance of meeting staffs needs, ways in which to do this and what happens when needs are not met. The findings are that currently many homes have unnecessarily high staff turnovers, which can be reduced with little effort, having a dramatic effect on the quality of care within those homes.*

Until now the needs of staff have generally not been a high enough priority in many homes. Most homes, even if they work from a therapeutic model, do not place much emphasis on the staff team and their needs. Most therapy models have been focused on individual aspects of people rather than on people.

For example :

- \* A cognitive approach will work with the thinking processes of people.
- \* A behavioural approach will work with the behaviour of people.
- \* A psychodynamic approach will try to find the unconscious processes behind problems and where in the childhood they originated (which actually deepens the trauma and can make a person feel worse due to the constant reliving of the trauma and other bad memories).

Over the last decade a new approach has arisen using all the latest scientific advances to bring all the scientifically accurate parts of other approaches in line with what is known about human evolution and how the human mind works. This approach is the Human Givens approach. The approach is revolutionising counselling and psychotherapy and is now being applied to areas outside therapy such as education and business management.

The turnover of staff in most children's homes is far higher than it should be. Training staff before they started their first shifts I found that I could teach eight new staff members and on average out of these eight, four would be gone in three months, another two within the first six months and another one within the first year. So from eight new staff 75% would be gone in six months and at best one of them would last over a year.

This high level of staff turnover is all too familiar within many homes. If you add to this the length of time it takes to actually advertise, select, interview, employ, police check, train, then get on shift these staff members, it becomes a costly and timely process. Many homes seem to end up continually advertising for staff and holding interviews at least every few months, finding fewer people applying with each new batch of applicants.

It seems to me that the cheapest and most time-efficient way to approach this issue is to

- \* Refine the interviews and check what questions are being asked.
- \* Provide the staff with appropriate training and regular chances to talk with an independent psychotherapist who works on solving current issues that each staff member has.
- \* Work at creating a culture that facilitates meeting the needs of the staff.

### **What happens when staff needs are not being met?**

When needs are not being met appropriately there can be many undesirable effects on the staff team. The same applies when anyone's needs are not being met appropriately, whether they are individual members of the public, the children within the home or staff.

When needs are not met within the team, there is a higher level of:

- \* Staff turnover,
- \* Sickness,
- \* Addictive behaviour such as more staff smoking or staff smoking more or drug taking
- \* Staff drinking more when off shift, possibly some drinking excessively, which can affect the work they do on shift, and possibly even some drinking in work,
- \* Depression and depression related illnesses,
- \* Anger, staff having a lower tolerance level to getting angry,
- \* Poor concentration, tiredness which can lead to mistakes being made,
- \* Black and white thinking which leads to an "I'm right; you're wrong" attitude, with no compromise,
- \* Low motivation and an increase in a "don't care" attitude, complaining,
- \* Arguments between staff on different shifts, with staff blaming problems on other sets of staff saying things like, "They always give in for an easy life" or "They are always too hard on the kids".

All of these problems and more arise from staff not having their needs met adequately. They have an impact on the company financially and on the time of the managers and directors. They also have an impact on the staff team as a whole and on the children and young people who are in the home.

### **Is it worth the cost?**

Financially, not meeting the needs of staff can be very costly. It can be expensive to keep going through the process of hiring new staff, and the effects on the children in the home can lead to an unstable atmosphere which can then lead to lost placements which can be difficult to fill again.

Aside from the financial costs, there is the cost of the time of the managers, constantly dealing with hiring and with referrals due to trying to fill placements. Then there is the added pressure on the manager, having to deal with unhappy and stressed staff who are struggling to cope with being spread thinly because of low staffing levels, having to do overtime, worrying about who the next referral will be and whether they will be placed just to fill beds regardless of what staff think about their suitability within the mix of the others in the home.

### **Needs and innate coping skills**

The basic emotional needs are a set of needs that all human beings are born with. We all need to have them met appropriately and healthily. If they are not met, it causes

emotional distress and can cause greed (where a need becomes a want). This can often be seen in children who are looked after. When they have not had their need met to give and receive attention, it can lead to attention-seeking behaviour.

Some of the main emotional needs are:

- \* To give and receive attention,
- \* Keeping a good balance of the mind/body connection, (e.g. Stress can cause physical problems; lack of sleep lowers the immune system.)
- \* To have purpose and goals,
- \* To belong to a wider community (e.g., a group co-operating),
- \* To have a sense of control and independence,
- \* To feel a sense of security,
- \* To have a sense of status within a social group,
- \* To have a sense of competence and achievement,
- \* To feel understood and emotionally connected to others.

To help meet these needs we all have innate coping skills, such as the ability to relax, the ability to tolerate uncertainty, and the ability to gain mental distance from a problem. These skills and many others help us to get our needs met and help us to deal with problems that we face and which may prevent those needs from being met.

All individuals have varying degrees of ability with these coping skills, yet all individuals can be taught how to improve them. It is vital that staff have the opportunity to improve their coping skills and to take time to see which needs for them are not being met. People are all different. It is the perception that they have of a specific situation that is important. One person could feel a sense of control in a situation while the staff member next to them may feel that the situation is out of their control.

The main needs that are often poorly met in children's homes are:

- \* The mind/body connection,
- \* Giving and receiving attention,
- \* Sense of control,
- \* Feeling understood,
- \* Sense of purpose.

Staff often find themselves tired and not eating properly. They find that they have no one to talk to about problems and do not feel that they can talk to senior staff. They feel that those making decisions about the children entering the home do not listen to the staff. They feel that they have no control over referrals or staffing decisions, and often face situations as part of the job that they feel out of control of. They often feel that 'management' do not understand them or know what it is like in the home. They feel that they have no real purpose or goals, and that what they offer is just like a bed and breakfast for the young people.

### **Creating a staff friendly culture**

Meeting the needs of the staff and improving their coping skills are relatively easy; it does not take big changes. To develop coping skills, the most important aspect is to teach staff to relax and to be able to remain calm in difficult situations. This helps enormously with the ability of the staff to use their other coping skills, because when people are relaxed, they can view situations rationally and objectively.

Staff need to learn how to deal with and notice the difference between what is and what is not within their control. This is necessary, as worrying about things that are out of your control only causes more stress and those things that are in your control should be problem solved. All worry should be converted into finding a way to directly deal with the situation.

A counsellor or psychotherapist should be hired to see staff at least every few months in individual sessions privately and confidentially, to discuss how they are getting on and to help with their coping skills and ensure that their needs are being met. The therapist will also help staff deal with their work/life balance as someone with problems at home that are causing them stress may struggle with remaining calm at work.

The management need to also work at creating a culture that helps meet the needs of the staff. If the needs of the staff are met, then the care they offer will be of the highest quality, which will have an impact on the children and young people and the atmosphere within the home.

Choosing a therapist can be a tricky task. It is so easy for companies just to choose the cheapest therapist, assuming all therapists are the same. Unfortunately they are not. There are over four hundred different forms of counselling and psychotherapy, all with different approaches. Some of these are more effective than others, and some cause more harm than good, and the organisations that a therapist belongs to have no bearing on their skills, abilities or effectiveness.

An appropriate therapist will:

- \* Understand psychological conditions and their processes from all the latest scientific findings.
- \* Be able to help immediately with trauma or anxiety problems.
- \* Give advice if asked without using jargon or psychobabble.
- \* Not dwell unduly on the past.
- \* Be supportive with difficult feelings, but will not encourage people to remain in an emotionally aroused state.
- \* Will not ask staff to keep going through painful emotions.
- \* Be able to help with developing social skills and improving coping skills.
- \* Help people find their own resources.
- \* Be able to teach deep relaxation.
- \* Help people to think about problems in a new, more empowering way.

## **Further reading**

***Human Givens: a new approach to emotional health & clear thinking***  
Joe Griffin & Ivan Tyrrell, 2003, HG Publishing, [www.amazon.co.uk](http://www.amazon.co.uk), £25

***The Sickening Mind: brain, behaviour, immunity & disease***  
Paul Martin, 1997, Flamingo, [www.amazon.co.uk](http://www.amazon.co.uk), £8.99

***Managing the monkey: how to defuse the conflicts that can lead to violence in the workplace***

Mark Dawes & Denise Winn, 1999, Cromwell Press, [www.amazon.co.uk](http://www.amazon.co.uk), £9.95

***Working in children's homes: challenges and complexities***

Dorothy Whitaker & Lesley Archer & Leslie Hicks, 1998, John Wiley & Sons, [www.amazon.co.uk](http://www.amazon.co.uk)

**Notes on the author**

Daniel Jones is a private psychotherapist. He holds workshops including stress and anger management, communication skills, behaviour management and restraint, and he runs workshops for young people. Previously he worked in residential childcare and helped setting up a therapeutic home. He works at improving the quality of residential childcare.