

The challenging behaviour in young children



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Boys A, along with his friends fight inside and outside of school, and are involved in binge drinking and other ‘nuisance’ behaviour within the community. He migrates between his two separated parents. He is not given adequate boundaries or supervision. The mother has stated to the school and local community support officers that she is unable to control him. His form teacher believes that other agencies should be involved. Other teachers are threatening not to teach him. He is described as ‘a disruptive child with behavioural problems that affect the rest of the class. His grades are below average and his attendance poor. The police are aware of him, although no charges have been brought. Residents have campaigned to have his family evicted due to his anti-social behaviour.

1. 2 Introduction

The local council has commissioned this report and its aim is to explore a range of strategies to better deal with challenging behaviour of the type exhibited by Boy A. Initially the report shall seek a definition of the term ‘challenging behaviour’. Then shall endeavour to meet its aims through an analysis of a range of existing efforts employed by various agencies, whilst discussing how they might be relevant to our case study, and by extension to challenging behaviour in the wider context.

1. 3 Challenging Behaviour: A Definition

Emerson (2001: 3) has defined the term thus:

“ Culturally abnormal behaviour of such...that the physical safety of the person or others is likely to be placed in serious jeopardy, or behaviour which

is likely to seriously limit use of, or result in the person being denied access to, ordinary community facilities”

Whilst this would perhaps serve to define the behaviour of Boy A, it cannot help us explain its causes. This report shall explore the aspects of his life that may cause this behaviour, and the strategies that can ‘challenge’ that behaviour.

2. 1 Challenging Behaviour in a School Setting

The 2005 Ofsted report, ‘Managing Challenging Behaviour’ analysed an “... account of behaviour in schools based on national evidence” (Ofsted, 2005: 3), the main type of which was the “...persistent, low level disruption of lessons that... interrupts learning” (Ofsted, 2005: 4). Acts of verbal or physical abuse aimed at peers were found in the majority of schools, whilst abuse aimed at teachers was less common. Acts of extreme violence were very rare and mostly directed at fellow pupils.

The average percentage of primary schools, where behaviour is rated as good or better stands at 85. 3% for primary schools, but only 73. 3% for secondary schools. A reason for this is given by Emerson, (2001: 24) who states that the “...prevalence of challenging behaviour appears to increase during childhood, reaching a peak during the age range 15-34”.

Exclusions from all schools dropped from 11, 181 in 93/94, to 9, 290 by 2002/03, showing perhaps that schools are dealing with challenging behaviour in more proactive ways. However, studies have shown that some schools operate a policy of ‘backdoor’ exclusions, whereby a disruptive child’s parents are offered the chance to transfer that child to another

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school, hence keeping the schools exclusion rate artificially low (Wright & Weekes, 2000). Arguably, this policy is growing in popularity, warping the figures.

Boys are more likely to be disruptive than girls all through education. Often disruptive pupils joined the school late in a school year and struggle to form relationships with pupils and staff. Many are in care or from troubled families. Significant numbers have irregular attendance causing disruption to learning and the development of relationships. A third of pupils with behavioural difficulties in secondary schools have special educational needs.

2. 2 Effective Strategies That ‘ Challenge’ Behaviour

The Ofsted report highlights strategies taken by schools to tackle challenging behaviour.

Behavioural policies that set out expectations consistently and fairly are more effective at ‘ challenging’ behaviour. McNamara & Moreton (2001) further this by advocating the use of pupil devised ‘ classroom charters’. These are seen by the authors to be especially beneficial to pupils with behavioural difficulties such as Boy A, arguably because they have the effect of encouraging good behaviour through peer pressure.

The reinforcement of good behaviour. Behaviourists suggest that teachers should “...identify positive behaviour...by the pupil and reward this behaviour ” (McNamara & Moreton, 2001: 31). This may be beneficial to pupils like Boy A, who can perhaps feel victimised by staff who constantly highlight their negative behaviour.

Multi-agency approaches, involving educational welfare officers, social workers, psychologists and others if required (General Teaching Council for England, 2007) are essential. This can be achieved through Behaviour and Educational Support Teams (BEST's), where teams of professionals are given a mandate in a school to tackle challenging behaviour. A recent government report found that for schools participating with BEST's there was an increase in attendance and a decrease in fixed time exclusions (DfES, 2005). However according to the Ofsted (2005: 21) report there appears to be a reluctance by schools and/or LEA's to use this multi-agency model, with only half of schools having a satisfactory relationship with key agencies such as social and health services.

3. 1 Boy A: Effective Strategies

Learning mentors work within schools to coordinate activities to support students with behavioural problems (General Teaching Council For England 2007). This could arguably give Boy A the degree of supervision in his education missing from his disjointed home life, whilst improving his irregular attendance (absenteeism being within their remit).

Family therapy sessions and parenting courses can equip parents with skills for improving the behaviour of their child (ibid, 2007). Boy A's mother has stated that she is unable to control him, so help such as this could be an step towards 'challenging' his behaviour through improved parenting.

Taking pupils like Boy A out of the school environment and placing them into a centre where less emphasis is put on academic achievement could arguably help those such as Boy A. It could also be a way of avoiding

excluding pupils, which may only serve to further label them as unmanageable. These centres, whilst still teaching the core of the curriculum, also have lessons on alcohol/drug awareness and citizenship, as well as a provision for training programmes (ibid, 2007).

4. 1 The CJS Approach to Challenging or Offending Behaviour

Crime and Disorder Act 1998 (CDA 1998) – Established the Youth Justice Board (YJB) and Youth Offending Teams (YOT's), and measures aimed at curbing youth offending such as anti-social behaviour orders (ASBO's), parenting orders and curfew orders for the under 10's.

Youth Justice and Criminal Evidence Act 1999 (YJCEA 1999) – Established the referral order, whereby offenders aged 10-17 who plead guilty to a first time offence are referred to a YOT.

Criminal Justice and Police Act 2001 (CJPA 2001) – Further extended the remit of curfew orders to apply to under 16's, or to a specific area rather than any individual.

(Crawford & Newburn, 2003)

These acts of legislation form the basis of the 'new' youth justice reforms of the then Labour government, whose aim were to shift resources away from processing young offenders, to preventing them from offending in the first place (Crawford & Newburn, 2003). The advent of YOT's, which a youth can be referred to if they plead guilty to a first time offence, has come in for general praise from most quarters (NACRO, 2002). Their aim is to divert

youths away from the formal CJS and into a setting more focussed on behavioural intervention than punishment. Offenders are expected to participate in a program of rehabilitation featuring a strong element of reparation, that also deals with the causal risk factors of further potential offending. Other behavioural strategies such as ASBO's have been widely criticised for "...contributing to a policy of social exclusion that disregards the rights of...young people" (Burnett & Appleton, 2004: 49).

4. 2 Youth Offending Strategies within the CJS

This section shall discuss the options that are theoretically open to the CJS in dealing with behaviour such as Boy A's.

Parenting orders can be given if a child truants, offends or is subject to an ASBO. Parents are required by law to attend guidance sessions, and fulfill any conditions attached to an order, such as attending meetings with teachers or ensuring that their child is properly supervised (Youth Justice Board, nd). This intervention could arguably help Boy A and others in his position given that he receives no meaningful supervision from his parents. Such guidance, although forced onto his parents, could potentially help them resolve the parenting problems that potentially affect their son's behaviour. These orders have been criticised by authors such as Arthur (2005), who believes that resources should be allocated earlier in lives such as Boy A's to prevent them engaging in challenging/offending behaviour in the first place.

Curfew orders give the authorities the power to impose a time at which under 16's should be home. Their aim is to "...defend communities from anti-social behaviour and to protect children" (BBC online, 2001). Arguably this

may help Boy A and others, if only by keeping them off the streets at inappropriate times. However it is possible that attempting to block the child's goal of going out, would only serve to frustrate him/her into further expressing challenging behaviour aimed at those around them. This would be in line with the psychologically derived drive theory (Dollard & Miller et al, 1939).

ASBOS's carry a civil burden of proof, and are designed to protect against "... any aggressive, intimidating or destructive activity that damages... another person's quality of life" (Home Office, 2010). If breached they can become a criminal matter worthy of up to five years imprisonment. They have been criticised as an unacceptable blurring of legal lines, which only serve to criminalise children for non-criminal behaviour (The Guardian website, 2009).

5. 1 Theoretical Explanations of Youth Offending Behaviour

It is known that Boy A migrates between his separated parents, depending on who he has fallen out with. Some theorists have concluded that conflicts such as this between parent and child contribute to the risk of offending by the affected child. Healy & Bronner (1936), working under the psychoanalytical umbrella, applied the idea of sublimation (the channelling of unacceptable impulses) to offending behaviour. This is where a child suffers dissatisfaction from a failure to experience strong emotional ties with a parent, which then manifests itself in delinquency such as Boy A's.

Labelling theory would argue it is those who hold positions of social power (such as teachers and arguably neighbours), that determine who is 'labelled' as nuisance/anti-social/criminal (Hollin, 1989). Gove (1975, cited in Hollin,

1989) contests a consequence of 'labelling' is that of stigmatisation, where the public attitude of condemnation creating social exclusion of the individual. This may in turn create a modification of self-image, where a person starts to believe society's condemnation and modifies their self-image so as to match the 'label', thus creating further risk of offending. This may apply to those in the same position as Boy A, who when surrounded by condemnation by those in apparently superior social positions (teachers/neighbours), merely become the 'label'.

Conclusion

It is this reports view that proactive behavioural strategies, that have the welfare of the child at heart offer the best chance to 'challenge' the types of behaviour shown by those such as Boy A. Reactive policies such as ASBO's are not concerned with why a child is acting anti-socially, only that the behaviour should end. This may inevitably lead to a breach of an order and potential criminal sanctions (with all the problems such as future employability this has), as surely there is no hope for an 'end' until the factors that lead to the ASB (Boy A's tumultuous home life) are dealt with.

S. 2. 1 shows that a child's behavioural difficulties increase the further they advance into their teenage years. It would therefore be easy to say that the majority of resources should be targeted at this age group. However it is this reports view that intervention strategies should be targeted at children as young as possible, as surely this increase in challenging behaviour exhibited by older children can be put down to a behavioural 'snowball' effect, caused by it not being 'challenged' early enough.

This report believes that behavioural strategies that work on a broader school level (s. 2. 2), are desirable to the more individualistic strategies(3. 1) discussed. This is because they attach no stigma to any individual child, and in some cases, such as with ‘ classroom charters’ can even be self-policed through the exertion of peer pressure. It is obvious that in a few cases a child’s behaviour (arguably Boy A’s) is such, that it should be dealt with in isolation of the others. This should be done in as sensitive a manner as possible, so as to minimise both the feeling of the child being ‘ picked on’ by staff, or for his peers, the feeling that he is receiving extra attention.

For Boy A and others, an escalation in behavioural problems would lead them into the realm of the Youth Justice System, dealt with in s. 4. 1&2. Overall, the ‘ new’ youth justice reforms of the previous government have had a positive impact on dealing with challenging/offending behaviour. Due to their welfarist approach to troubled youths, YOT’s are particularly welcomed by this report, and may offer those like Boy A a final opportunity to reform before being passed to the more formal CJS.