



CDI Restorative Practices

Case Study 4

Using RP in a Respite Service





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Geraldine Ward is a Social Care Leader in a respite service in Clare. They provide young people with a respite break from foster care or from their own homes. They collect young people from their home, look after them for 24 or 48 hours and bring them back again.

Geraldine had her first experience of RP when she was assaulted at work by a young person she was caring for. Following this event, which was reported to the Gardaí, the Garda juvenile liaison service offered her the opportunity to take part in a restorative process with the young person. She said the facilitated meeting was really helpful, commenting that *“He lived in the centre and I looked after him, but ... yet he had harmed me, so my trust with him was damaged. The process taught me to be more empathetic to the person, the whole person, and it gave him an opportunity to really know that I had been harmed by it, but also to say he was sorry, and me to know it, so actually it was a very good process. I would think of him perhaps more positively than some others who worked with him and had similar experiences.”*

Restorative Practices and trauma

Coming from that positive experience, Geraldine was in favour of bringing RP to the respite centre, thinking it was especially meaningful when working with people affected by trauma. *“It gives us an opportunity to provide a different experience for them, to be different with them.”*

She uses RP in her work informally. The main objective is to make young people feel comfortable in the centre. It has to be a nice and safe place for them. She found that the RP questions helped a lot in the conversations with the young people, who had experienced trauma. RP created trust with the adults and supported the development of emotional intelligence in a gentle way. She commented that *“The restorative questions are very useful, especially when I am meeting a young person who is quite defensive, because they don’t know, given their experience, what the right answer is. And telling the truth is kind of difficult because maybe they told the truth before and they were in trouble. In that context RP is really useful.”*

Building relationships

For Geraldine, RP are about building relationships. *"It's about the commonalities and the human factors, and I think it's what we should focus on when we are caring for children anyway. When you put relationships ... at the centre of the exchange with the child, then it becomes much easier. You're much more human and empathetic, while still being the adult in the relationship."*

Opening and closing circles are used in staff meetings. *"Sometimes they are used to lighten the mood, to bring a bit of humour, and sometimes they're used to make us think of how we are as colleagues, what annoys us at work, or what our colleague does that drives us insane. Depending on how busy, or how emotional things have been, we can decide the questions or what we want to use."*

The team also use problem-solving circles, sometimes a bit more informally, and it helps the staff to keep working *with* the young people and not *for* or *against* them.

Overall, Geraldine enjoys the fact that RP improve relationships at work. She recalls when one colleague shared a childhood story about a potato scoop during one of the circle times. *"I feel like we know each other, on a human level, vulnerable sometimes. It helps when you meet a colleague and their views are very different to you, sometimes you have to remember the human bit, that they were excited about a potato scoop when they were ten ..."*

Geraldine had been involved in two facilitated restorative meetings following incidents with colleagues. She found that *"Both of them have been quite good. The second one, where I thought I was the harmed person, actually, it turned out I wasn't. I had actually said something which was harmful to the other person and without that conference we wouldn't have realised that both of us made errors."*

Thinking before reacting

Geraldine said that RP had made a difference to her general approach. *"I would like to think that I am more of a thinker in my relationship with my colleagues and the young people I care for rather than reactive or punitive. I would like to think that when I get a feeling of indignation, I go 'Ok, stop, get off your high horse and let's think about this in a different way'. It has given me, like, a button that I have to press when I can feel myself becoming that way. I had one or two difficulties in my family life where I felt very harmed by somebody and I have used the restorative approach, which gave me a framework to talk about being hurt, rather than what actually happened and then to say the relationship was fundamental. The RP principles have just given me a way to say 'Look this is important to me' and to move it on."*

Fairness and neutrality – a 'formula' for resolving problems

The fact that RP provide a fair process is essential to Geraldine. She said that *"Fairness is hugely important to me, as an individual, as a person, as a child it was, so I hope I provide a space where the children can feel they've been treated fairly, where my colleagues have been treated fairly, that there is no favouritism."* She added that having clear and fair processes in place helped create a safe atmosphere in the centre. *"The young people we work with, they feel it. We ask them for feedback and some of the older kids would say it's a great place to come because you can chill out, be on your own and spend time by yourself, or you can talk to people. We help them just relax sometimes. We help them navigate the problems that other adults haven't sat down and talked to them about. We are not social workers, but we understand that world. Sometimes we can give them the framework where decisions are made, just even the space to explore a little bit. For the younger kids, we just offer that space away from home to just explore who they are. It's a nice place, there was money spent to make it look nice, it feels special."*

As a staff member, Geraldine feels RP gave her confidence. *"It's nice to work in a place where there is a formula almost to resolve problems. If you think that something is not ok, you can have a formula to go in and address the problem. That gives you a bit of confidence to approach those difficult conversations."*