

## Integrated Therapeutic Group Work with Young Children in a Family Support Setting

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Barnardos is a national voluntary childcare organisation. In the Eastern Region Coastal Area, Barnardos offers a range and continuum of family support services operating from three Family Centres. This paper focuses on just one aspect of service provision; namely, Therapeutic Group Work Programmes which are provided directly for young children in the context of support for the family. This paper outlines the underlying principles of the work; describes the practical process of how children and their families are referred and assessed; details the Programme and consequent Family Support work, and illustrates the core function of team work within the centres. Sample profiles of children and their families will be provided during the presentation.

### Underlying Principles

**Early Intervention:** Barnardos believes that early intervention and parental support in a child's life is imperative in order to break the cycle of disadvantage and social exclusion. As identified by Home-Start International (2002: 27) "*The early years set in motion a train of events that are the basis of later development. A significant body of research evidence links physical, social, emotional and intellectual development with what happens to children in the first 5 years.*"

**Matching Needs and Services:** Many of the families attending Barnardos services experience such high levels of social exclusion that it is impossible for them to engage in mainstream services with their young children. In order to ensure that effective services which match the needs of the families are planned, implemented and evaluated, a needs assessment exercise was conducted by the Dartington Social Research Institute (London) in 2002-2003 and criteria for selection of families was developed. (See Dartington - i, 2003).

**Promoting Protective Factors:** All children need to develop social skills and the ability to both communicate effectively and form positive relationships with their peers and significant others. Barnardos has adopted the High/Scope early childhood care and education curriculum in their Family Centres. The focus is to identify and promote protective factors for the individual child. The individual planned programme for each child strives to increase the child's resilience and self-esteem by providing intensive and supportive opportunities for growth and development. Emphasis is placed on a partnership model between the child, the family and other professionals, focusing on a solutions and strengths based approach. As identified by Cleaver *et al.*, (1999):

*“A detailed exploration of the impact of parental mental illness, problem drinking or drug use, or domestic violence on children’s health and development at different stages of life showed that the short and long-term consequences for children will depend on the combination of resilience and protective mechanisms.....Very young children are particularly vulnerable to the impact of inconsistent and ineffective parenting.”*

**Family Support:** All the evidence indicates that attachment is essential to the healthy development of the young child. As outlined in detail by the Department of Health (2000), secure attachments to significant adults help children to develop appropriate peer relationships, and develop the skills to cope well with problems as they arise. As identified by Home-Start International (2002:27):

*“Bronfenbrenner was among the first to recognise the importance of parents in any child-centred intervention. The impact of the mother’s relationship with the child, and the dynamics of the relationships within the family and the outside world are seen as crucial factors in satisfactory child development.”*

Barnardos work to support the development of the parent/child relationship as the primary relationship in the child’s life and provide opportunity for other successful attachments to significant adults such as the other parent, and where appropriate, extended family members and the Key Worker in Barnardos. Any services to the children work in the context of the family and seek to engage with the systems in place to effect greater impact on positive outcomes for children.

### **Referral of Families to the Centres**

The following are the routes through which children and their families can become engaged with Barnardos services. Referrals are received from the following identified sources:

- Adult and Child Psychiatric Services;
- Dún Laoghaire Rathdown County Council (DLRCC) Homeless Unit;
- East Coast Area Health Board (ECAHB) Child and Family Services (through Social Workers, Public Health Nurses, Speech and Language Therapists);
- ECAHB Drugs/Aids services (Addiction Treatment Centres, Doctors, Nurses, Counsellors);
- Foras Áiseanna Saothair Training and Employment Authority (FÁS);
- Judicial System, by order of the courts;
- Local schools and external early years services;
- Self-referral or via other Barnardos services.

Information is provided by the referrer on a standard Barnardos referral form which is received in writing to the referrer and the family. Each child's individual referral is then discussed at a team meeting. When three or more of the following criteria apply to a family, they are considered to be eligible for assessment.

***Criteria for the Selection of Service Users***

- Homelessness/living in temporary accommodation;
- Overcrowding/poor housing/moving home frequently;
- Parental learning disability;
- Parental psychiatric illness;
- Parental addiction;
- Domestic violence;
- Lone parent/isolation lacking family support;
- Parental history in the care system;
- Young parent less than twenty-one years;
- Poverty/low income;
- Poor parent/child relationship;
- The need for child protection;
- Child or siblings in voluntary care;
- Child living with non-biological parent;
- Child exhibiting challenging behaviour;
- Family involvement with the criminal justice system;
- Childhood developmental delay.

During the presentation of this paper two case studies, which highlight the level and multiplicity of need of the families involved and which demonstrate the application of these criteria, will be presented.

**Assessment**

Each parent and child is invited to attend a meeting with a Key Worker from the group programme and the Family Worker or Centre Manager. The purpose of this meeting is to make an assessment of the level of need presenting in the family and gain a broader picture of the family circumstances. The work of the Centre is outlined to parents with the expectation that parents will be involved in the programme and that the focus of the service is not crèche or childcare provision.

Following the assessment meeting, consultation may occur with the referral source or with other relevant personnel who may have been identified as important during the assessment meeting. Consent is always given for this communication and consent for interagency communication is compulsory when parents are attending the drug treatment clinic.

The Barnardos staff team meet again to consider the outcome and recommendations of the assessment process. At this meeting an individual planned response is agreed for the child in the context of his/her family and for what supports/process need to happen to engage the child in the group programme. It is possible that the child may be deemed not to be ready or able to participate in a group programme. In this instance, a further period of assessment may be planned, with the parent and child attending as required for one-to-one sessions with a Childcare Worker/Family Worker, to gain a better insight into the needs of the child. The group work referral is then reviewed in due course.

### **Therapeutic Group Programme**

There are two Therapeutic Group Programmes on offer within each Family Centre: an Early Years Programme catering for children in the one to three year age group and a Preschool Programme for the three to six year age group. Places are assigned depending on the developmental stage of the child and the level of need to be addressed. The need to have an Early Years group was identified as part of Barnardos ongoing review of services. This indicated that children arriving into the preschool group at three years had already established disruptive and difficult behaviour patterns and that the parent/child relationship was often fractured and in difficulty. Intervention at an earlier stage provides an opportunity to work with the parent and child prior to the establishment of such difficulties. The involvement of parents in this work through the provision of information and skill-based learning and support is vital. As children grow and develop, their need for independence and mobility places increased pressure on the ability of their parents to respond to their needs, which may place the relationship between parent and child at risk.

Each programme caters for a small group of children with Key Workers who each support a group of 5 children. There is a third member of staff allocated to the group to support the needs of individual children within the Group Programme, and also to enhance the quality of the overall service. This is an invaluable resource to the team working directly with the children, as it enables Key Workers to continue with the Group Programme at a time when an individual child may be unable to participate.

The day starts with the arrival of the children and their parents. Parents are encouraged to spend some time playing with their child and the Key Worker is available to discuss anything of concern or to role-model certain play or child management situations as appropriate. This daily point of contact with home, bringing the family into the children's space ensures that there is a visible link between home and the learning environment for the child. There is great opportunity for shared learning between the staff and the parents at this time and it means that when a family is in crisis, or needs more specific support, the Key Worker can ensure that the parent speaks to the Family Worker or Centre Manager

on the day. The programme is planned to meet both the individual and the group needs with the daily routine reflecting opportunities for specific one-to-one interventions which may include play therapy or speech and language therapy. The Group Programme offers an environment which is rich in play materials and provides socialisation opportunities for the children in a highly supportive session. There is a high emphasis on supporting the social and emotional development by the child therefore increasing their potential for learning outcomes in other areas of their development.

The Active Learning Model promoted through High/Scope, with children's participation in daily and weekly planning, is a structure which responds to the needs of these children for decision making opportunities, conflict resolution and a safe and predictable environment.

This sense of being in control of their environment, and of what can happen there, is a new experience for many children and particularly for children whose day-to-day family lives are often chaotic and unpredictable.

The provision of key experiences allows for children's individual needs to be met within the context of the group. Given the high level of need, the children must be allowed to work through painful and traumatic experiences in a safe and responsive environment with adults around them who are predictable and consistent. This working through of experiences can manifest in their behaviour which at times can become very disruptive and may require one-to-one shadowing for a period of time. On the other hand, it may manifest as deeply withdrawn and almost psychotic behaviour, which will require a different but equally one-to-one response.

Children's progress and experiences are monitored on a daily basis and a weekly record is placed on each child's file by the Key Worker. The children and family needs are discussed twice a week by the team at family focussed meetings, which occur immediately after the session with the children.

Formal communication with parents occurs twice a year via a planned review structure. In this forum, the positive outcomes for children are discussed and strengths are identified in the family. In addition to this, any areas of concern are identified and a plan is made to address these going forward.

### **Family Support**

The Group Programme, described above, operates in the context of a Family Centre where the emphasis is on supporting parents to parent more effectively and to make choices which will enhance their lives and their children's lives. The Centre works with parents on

a number of levels, depending on their needs and their ability to engage. Parents are offered daily informal contact as described above, through the Key Worker in the children's Group Programme. The Family Worker is available for weekly counselling sessions as part of a support package for the parent. The focus of this type of work is on the parenting role and family related matters. The Family Worker or Centre Manager engages with, or make referrals to, external supports/agencies as appropriate. In a number of cases, the Family Worker supervises the work of the family skills worker provided through the ECAHB, and supports the provision of a planned response across agencies.

Where it is not possible to arrange weekly parent support sessions, the Family Worker or Centre Manager liaises with parents informally at arrival and home times to ensure that responses can be made on an informal basis as they are required. Through our work we have found that parents need to know that support is available on demand, particularly where addiction is an issue. There is a strong emphasis within the team on working in a flexible and approachable way with parents, so that they feel that the door is always open to them and that any concerns in relation to the welfare of their child can be addressed immediately.

Another aspect of Family Support work offered as part of the Group Programme is parent/child work. This work brings together the parent and the child in a weekly play session which focuses on exploring positive play experiences with the parent and the child with the support of the Childcare Worker who works with the Group Programme. The facilities of Marte Meo intervention and Non-Directive Play Therapy are available within the skill base of the region.

Family support is also available through a group programme for parents. This offers a weekly group session to parents facilitated by Barnardos staff. The focus of this Group is to bring parents together to share experiences and provide opportunities for external supports to develop as friendships emerge. It is also a valuable forum to build on parents' capacity by providing personal development training and group parenting programmes. As part of the overall service to children and parents, a six-week programme is offered to parents, the focus being the approach used in the Therapeutic Group Programme with children. This is another strong link for parents with the day-to-day routine of their children in the Early Years and Preschool Groups.

Home visits are also an aspect of family support and are offered as part of assessment, or if required, as an outcome of family work or the child's planned programme. Family work is recorded on a session-by-session basis, or as an individual piece of work as required.

A central dynamic of the work with children and families is the interagency communication and networking which occurs from the point of referral onwards. This communication happens on both a formal and informal basis and both as direct advocacy on behalf of a child or family or as a point-of-referral to external service providers.

### **Team Work**

Barnardos staff work in a cohesive and focussed way to meet the needs of the children and families attending the service. The structure in place to support this model of work involves meetings of a formal and informal nature among key staff. Each staff member receives regular formal individual support and supervision from his/her line manager and annual staff appraisals are mandatory.

Centre staff meet twice monthly for family focussed meetings across the wider brief of the work in the Centre. Monthly information meetings are also essential with all staff receiving updates on Centre issues or organisational information.

Bi-weekly staff support and family focussed meetings occur to support the Therapeutic Group Programme. These meetings are attended by all staff working with the children and families concerned, including the Centre Manager. The staff working directly with the implementation of the children's Group Programme undertake programme planning on a daily and weekly basis. Service planning and formal review is also undertaken twice yearly as a formal group exercise. In addition, staff work in pairs, undertaking home visits and parent/child work. Regular staff training sessions are planned to support the quality of the service provision and external support networks are actively encouraged to update and inform practice. The teams also benefit from the expertise of an Endorsed High/Scope Trainer working with the children and families within the Family Centres.

### **Conclusion**

Children and their families attending Barnardos services exhibit a high degree of crisis. Barnardos believes that it is critical to link with these families at an early stage in the child's development and seek to equip both family and child with the necessary skills to engage in mainstream services appropriate to their needs, both in the present and into the future. In this regard, the Family Centre provides the Therapeutic Group Programme for the children with a high emphasis on family support. The objective is to work in a supportive way to identify the strengths within the family and provide opportunities for parents and children to develop appropriate skills which will in turn increase their capacity to engage with themselves, each other and the wider society. This is an innovative approach to family work. As stated by the Department of Health and Children (2001:3), *"Until recently family support has been a neglected aspect of family policy. In so many instances it has been overshadowed by interventions which have focussed predominantly on child protection."*

We believe these Barnardos services act as a protective force in the life of the family, providing a place to build on strengths and improve life chances for children through the mechanism of early intervention.

### References

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