

FUN IN ACTION FOR CHILDREN

Report on the work completed to the 30th September 2006

WHAT ARE THE PROBLEMS FACING OUR CHILDREN?

THE NATIONAL PICTURE

The Good Childhood Inquiry National Launch Report carried out by the Children's Society and published in September 2006 tells us, "The wellbeing of children in the UK is rated amongst the worst in Europe". The UK scored poorly for the quality of children's relationships with their parents and peers, for child health, for relative poverty and deprivation, for risky behaviour, and for teenage pregnancy. Depression and anxiety have increased for both boys and girls. 2 in every 10 children and young people in the UK have mental health problems – and 1 in every 10 go on to develop a clinically recognised mental health disorder (CAMHS 2004). Britain has the highest rate in Europe for children who self harm (Mental Health Foundation 2006) and Childline reported an increase of 14% in calls from children feeling suicidal last year. In a February 2007 report by UNICEF, the UK was found to be at the bottom of the scale of rankings (21st out of 21 developed countries) on all but 1 of 6 measures used to record child well being.

VULNERABLE GROUPS

Earlier research has pointed to specific groups of children who are most vulnerable to mental ill health and unhappiness. Poverty, and in particular the poverty of unemployed lone parent families, increase the likelihood of a child getting into difficulties. A study by the Institute for the Study of Civil Society in 2002 found children from lone parent families were 3.3 times more likely to have low self esteem, twice as likely to have mental health problems and 3 times more likely to have problems with academic work.

THE AREA SERVED BY FUN IN ACTION FOR CHILDREN

The city of Brighton and Hove appears prosperous but there is much hidden deprivation, particularly for those living in council estates on the edges of the city far from the affluent centre. It has the highest concentration of lone parent families in the southeast outside London and nearly 1 in 4 children live below the poverty line in the city. Brighton and Hove also has unusually high percentages of children in local authority care (National Census 2001).

Last year we had almost 2 children referred every month. Overall we received 25 new referrals in the year.

- We completed the year with 55 children waiting for a befriender.
- The problems of the families referred to Fun in Action have increased in severity with more children being referred who are on the 'At Risk Register' (24%).
- Of the parents on our current waiting list almost half have health or addiction problems.
- Families commonly live on state benefits and parents do not work (82%).
- When parents have a physical disability (23%) roles are reversed and children take on caring responsibilities

WHAT DO CHILDREN NEED AND HOW DOES FUN IN ACTION HELP?

The Good Childhood Enquiry 2006 sought the views of children and young people about what **they** felt was important for their wellbeing. The words 'caring' and 'love' were both in the top 20 keywords in the responses of young people to the question of what they needed, as was the word 'support' and other related words such as 'help' and 'talk'. Almost a third said they agreed with the statement "I often long for someone to turn to for advice."

Fun in action seeks to provide the support and caring children say they need which they may not be able to find in sufficient measure at home. Ill health, disability, (either a parent or sibling) social isolation and poverty all take their toll on a lone parent's ability to fully support their children and nurture their aspirations. The fact that father is absent can also cause problems, particularly for boys trying to establish a positive male identity.

Of the 55 children on our waiting list at the year end:

- 27% have some form of special needs (Attention Hyperactivity Disorder, Autism, Learning Difficulties)
- 55% have problems in school (either with the work, bullying or with their peer group)
- 60% have problems getting on with others
- 75% lack confidence and have low self esteem
- Most (82%) of the children need opportunities to get out and about and explore the world and its possibilities - the sorts of opportunities more privileged children are able to take for granted

Children who have problems but can still trust and engage with adults, will not always need professional help; unpaid volunteers from all walks of life who are able to reflect on the experience of others and have a degree of insight about their own attitudes, can do the job equally well and this costs considerably less (our estimated yearly cost is £1,645 per friendship). Research into why some children growing up in adversity do better than others found those

who did well almost always had another significant adult from outside the family who helped guide them through childhood. (See Maslem and Coatsworth – Lessons from Research, American Psychologist 1998))

Many of our friendships last for much longer than the 2 years and some will continue for life. Having 2 years of good support through befriending is usually sufficient time for positives changes to take root.

For example of the 8 friendships that ended in the year (average length 26 months)

- 4 young people felt better prepared to move into adolescence (increased confidence and peer friendships)
- 1 little boy learnt to show his feelings and talk about his worries and 1 hyperactive child is much calmer
- 2 boys developed new interests which will be sustained (competitive swimming and joining the cadets)

PROVIDING A SAFE AND EFFECTIVE SERVICE

Our vetting process is rigorous and designed to exclude any person who would present a danger to a child or is unsuitable for any other reason. The full process takes an average of 3 months. Befrienders complete 2 face-to-face interviews, 3 days of group training, they are visited in their homes, 3 detailed references are taken up and they must complete an Enhanced Criminal Records Bureau check. Establishing motivation is important, as is an assessment of applicant's skills and staying power. Once accepted befrienders work with their allocated caseworker, reporting back at regular intervals and accepting support and supervision as outlined in their befrienders Code of Conduct Guidebook. (Both staff are professionally qualified social workers with a combined total of 18 years experience in the mentoring /befriending field). Befrienders also have the opportunity to attend relevant lectures in child development provided by the Child Psychotherapy Trust. In 2002 and again in 2005 we were awarded the National Mentoring Network /Home Office 'Approved Provider Standard Award' in recognition of the quality of our service.

SNAPSHOT FOR WORK COMPLETED IN THE YEAR

Recruitment of befrienders

- In the year we responded to 68 enquires from interested adults and sent out 46 information packs. Of these enquiries 15% were from men and 85% from women.
- There was a good age range with around half of applicants being over 35 years.
- 9% (compared with 6% average overall population in Brighton and Hove) were from black and ethnic minority backgrounds and 9% were gay or lesbians.
- 66% were employed, 40% had experience of working with children and 55% were single.

From these enquiries we completed 37 in depth interviews (including home visits), processed 38 references and 26 Criminal Records Bureau Disclosures (for befrienders, partners and any adult children or others who would have contact with the children) and provided two full 3 day training programmes.

Retention Rates

From the initial 68 enquirers 36% began the befriender assessment process and 20% of applicants (1 person in 5) completed it and went on to be matched. People mainly dropped out because of the time commitment required.

New children referred We received 25 new referrals in the year and 2 children were taken off the waiting list (one taken into L.A. care and one left the area). Of the new referrals just over 50% were from Social Services, 35% from parents and the remainder from a mix of agencies including schools. 70% of the new children referred were boys.

New matches made In this last year we recruited, trained and fully assessed 17 new befrienders of whom 8 were matched with waiting children before the year-end and a further 9 taken forward to be matched in the following year. We ended the year with 33 match friendships at 30th September 2006. (Since then we have made 6 friendships)

Group outings and events

We provided 3 group outings in the year with a total attendance of 173 people including 86 children. Research has pointed to the positive effects community group outings have in reducing social exclusion in marginalised families. Certainly they are very popular with our families and help create a sense of belonging and community.

Where we arrived at the year end i.e. 30th September 2006

- 33 friendships (49% girls, 51% boys, 26% Special Needs, 9% Ethnic Minorities, 60% in place 1 year +)
- 55 children waiting (35% girls, 65% boys, 27% Special Needs, 20% Ethnic Minorities, 58% waiting 1year +)
- 9 new volunteer befriending applicants still completing their assessments (6 since accepted and matched)

Targets for next year end 30th September 2007

- Match last 3 befrienders carried forward from previous year
- Recruit, assess, train and match a further 12 - 16 new befrienders with waiting children
- Put in a funding bid to the Big Lottery to enable us to increase our recruitment of suitable male befrienders
- Support and manage our existing match friendships particularly the most recent matches
- Run 4 group outings (one each season) for all families and befrienders involved in the scheme

POSITIVE CHANGES FOR MATCHED CHILDREN

The figures shown represent the percentage of parents and children reporting improvements in outcomes for befriended children against the 4 targets. (Results taken from written feedback reports from children and parents)

<u>Reports from</u>	Improved relationships with others	Increased confidence - able to deal with probs.	Expanded horizons	Progress at school
Children	87%	87 %	94%	63%
Parents	82%	88%	94%	69%

In their feedback parents spoke about children becoming more contented and settled and learning to cooperate. There was strong feeling of relief and an easing of pressure through a burden shared. Children spoke of how much they valued the time they spent with their befriender as a peaceful space where they would be heard and understood and find solutions to their problems. Many of the children commented on how having someone just for themselves made them feel 'special' and "important". One example of a successful, but complex friendship, is between George and Michael.

George aged 13, was referred by his teacher. He is a highly intelligent boy but needy and wanting very much to be accepted by the males in his peer group. His mother felt she could not control George and was concerned about his refusal to listen to her or take any guidance.

George was matched with 32-year-old Michael, a young businessman 19 months ago. The contact has helped George to uncover and express a lot of sad feelings he had buried about his father's lack of interest in him. This has at times been difficult for everyone. A hurt child like George when confronted with a new and potentially good relationship will often struggle with whether or not the emotional risk is worth taking and whether they can allow themselves to be vulnerable again and face the possibilities of further hurt and rejection. Commitments are therefore made cautiously and Michael and Jane, George's mother, have been on something of a roller coaster ride with George over the last 12 months as more and more of his hurt feelings surfaced. His teachers who had previously described him as a 'distant' child now saw an 'extremely sad boy'.

Despite the challenges mother really wants what is best for her son and has never regretted having a befriender for him. She told us "I really respect and value Michael's opinion when it comes to George. It has been a long drawn out healing process with Georges's behaviour up and down and sometimes it has been tough to hear the truth about situations but now George can vocalise his problems and I can support him better and talk to his school".

Research into what makes for effective befriending (by the children's mental health charity 'Young Minds' in 2006) came up with a number of recommendations all of which are current practise at Fun in Action including:

- working in partnership with parents and including young people in decision making
- providing long term, as opposed to short term, befriending,
- ensuring children get the help early in life before negative behaviour patterns become entrenched,
- spending more than 10 hours per month with a child (our befrienders spend on average 16 hours)
- focusing on the *quality* of the relationships that develop between the befriender and child

This year we matched Alison and Denise. Denise is 9 years old and lives with her grandparents. Her parents are both drug addicts and are unable to care for her. She is a sad and lonely young girl, overweight and isolated at home and at school. Her self-esteem is at 'rock bottom' and she does not want to leave the house. She tries to be good and not upset or burden her grandparents. Denise's new befriender, 26-year-old Alison has overcome many obstacles in her own life and we are confident she has the understanding needed to help Denise to find some happiness and self-belief.

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