

'Keeping the Children Close'

Towards an Understanding of therapeutic provision at
The Mulberry Bush School

Researching the needs of
children in therapeutic
residential care

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"It can be really, really challenging but most of the time the challenges that we think are really challenging don't end up being really challenging at all, we just make a big thing about it. There are a lot of really good adults that we can trust that we like here at the school. Lots of good friends."

(Child F, interview)



Key points

- The Mulberry Bush does have clear principles that translate into an effective whole-school practice approach.
- Privacy and emotional intensity in the family home have been experienced as potentially threatening for the children, so the open, public nature of group life at the school is a protection for all concerned.
- When relationships are shared and relating is very 'public', we found that paradoxically, closer one-to-one moments can be more safely found.

The researchers:

Jane Herd, David Jones, Heather Price and Alice Sampson

Background

- An independent research study by UCL's Institute of Education reported very good outcomes for the Mulberry Bush children on a range of educational, behavioural, social and emotional measures. In 2015, the school commissioned a new team of researchers from the University of East London to study how the Mulberry Bush achieves such good outcomes.

Research area

The UEL study asked: *How does the therapeutic environment at the Mulberry Bush work?* and *What is the model for engaging and assisting children who experience severe social, emotional and mental health difficulties?*

Findings

We have found that the Mulberry Bush School's therapeutic approach is distinctive because it trains and supports its staff to stay close to the children's feelings. Staff build trusting relationships and work hard to empathise with the children's present and past experiences. When the children feel understood, the staff are able to challenge them and nudge them towards a more thoughtful, curious approach to their difficulties.

The intensive '24/7' nature of group living and group learning then provides many natural opportunities for the adults to work alongside the children to help them make their own positive choices.

“I used to just punch people in the head ... and also after that I wouldn't talk ... Once I do it now I feel sorry and bad ... it's just like you need to talk better to actually help you not do it.”
(Child A, interview)

There is increasing recognition that everyday relationships are central in supporting the emotional well-being and mental health of children in the care system. Yet some highly troubled children cannot manage ordinary family and school life. They find it hard to trust and their anti-social and disturbing behaviours make it difficult to get emotionally close to them or to be objective in making sense of their problems.

About the project

The UEL research team used a variety of ways to learn about what happens at the Mulberry Bush School. We:

- Visited regularly over 15 months and carried out over 30 observations
- Interviewed 7 of the children getting ready to leave
- Interviewed 13 front line staff and 8 senior staff about 'what works'
- Interviewed 7 individuals from agencies using the school's services

We also read research and policy documents about approaches to supporting traumatised children with social, emotional and behavioural difficulties. We looked at the school's own publications to see if the Mulberry Bush has clear principles that are consistently used to good effect in practice.

For further information

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The full report is available on request.