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From Sanctions to Support: Restorative Practices Transform Homes for Looked-after Children in the UK

BY LAURA MIRSKY

About four years ago, the Stanfield Home for looked-after children, in Welwyn-Garden City, Hertfordshire, UK, was in crisis. Relationships between staff and children were terrible, and there were many violent incidents, said Stanfield manager Veronica (Ron) Hart. Staff stress was causing big turnover rates and lots of long-term sick leave. Then restorative practices turned things around.

Stanfield consists of two homes, housing six youths each, on one site—one for ages 11–15 and one for ages 13–18 and older. These are youth who can't live with their family or a substitute (foster) family, due to abuse or neglect, or those with educational, truancy or behavioral problems, placed in the home by county social services.

In the old days at Stanfield, a system of sanctions was used to try to control kids. Called LOPS, or loss of privileges, it simply didn't work. A kid who misbehaved would be grounded, fined or have his or her pocket money delayed. "The place was totally sanctioned," said Hart, "and the police practically lived on-site."

Lynn Knowles, head of children's residential homes in Hertfordshire, also saw the need to change the disciplinary system. "On repeated occasions, the police would be called, and they would either do very little, which would actually have a more negative impact on what we were trying to achieve, or there would be a court appearance, which would be months down the line. By that time, the child had forgotten what they'd done," she said, adding, "That system wasn't working effectively at all."

At about this time, the UK government issued a directive to the youth justice boards to reduce offending and reoffending among young people. Of particular concern were children in care, who were four times more likely than others to be in trouble with police. Tom Reese, assistant director of Hertfordshire's Youth Justice Service, looking for a way to address the problem, came across restorative justice and decided to bring it to Hertfordshire's residential homes.

Ron Hart was introduced to restorative justice at a children's home managers' meeting, in a talk by Dick Auger of the Thames Valley Police Restorative Conferencing Project. When she heard about the results of such programs, she was eager to try it at Stanfield.

Stanfield was chosen as a pilot location for restorative justice. Hart and two other staff went to a five-day training with Nicola Preston and others from the Thames Valley project. They learned about restorative justice conferencing—whereby victims and offenders and their supporters come together to repair harm. They also found out about the restorative philosophy, which endorses doing things *with* people, rather than *to* them or *for* them and emphasizes support combined with accountability. Hart and her colleagues took to restorative practices immediately. "It's all about relationships," she said. "Now we had to try to sell it to the rest of the staff."



Veronica Hart cuddles with two Stanfield residents.

"It was a huge change," said Hart. "At first staff didn't want to relinquish their power." The toughest to win over were the ones who'd been there the longest. They were worried that the kids would use the new restorative methods to manipulate them and were afraid of sharing their feelings and themselves.

Kids, on the other hand, took to restorative practices immediately. They loved sharing their feelings and "what was going through their head," said Hart. And within a few months, the staff caught up to them. "What they've seen now is the results—that it actually does work," said Knowles.

After the first year of restorative practices implementation, said Hart, sanctions were reduced by 59 percent, calls to police by 40 percent, offending levels by a third. (Brian Littlefield is gathering this data, along with interviews with staff and youth, in a University of Hertfordshire study.)

More than restorative justice conferencing, what's used in the Hertfordshire homes are less formal restorative practices. "In a children's home you haven't got time to conference all the time," said

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Hart. "But when you've got two little chaps who are shouting, you have to deal with it there and then, because there are other children who might need your attention as well. So you use the restorative questions, but in a very informal way, to say, 'What happened? Well, how did you feel about that?' You go through the same process, but you put it into words that are much more simple for the child to understand, and you get them to come up with their own solutions: 'How are we going to make this better?' And if it's yourself, then you'd say, 'What I saw happening was this... and when I saw that I felt this...' so you're answering the restorative questions for yourself."

"It's more of a culture and ethos," said Hart. "You see it in the way staff and kids cuddle each other and talk to each other in the hall. Kids who've been ripping each other's eyes out now throw their arms around each other and insist on doing each other's chores. It's a massive difference, beyond anyone's wildest dreams."

Owing to the success at Stanfield, restorative practices are being implemented in all the children's homes in Hertfordshire, "to varying levels," said Knowles. "Ron [Hart] has been a great advocate for it. We've given training to staff in all eight of the homes, including two for children with disabilities." Regarding the use of restorative practices with children with disabilities, Knowles said, "The principles—about working with relationships—apply to all children, especially children who have communication difficulties. They can't understand: 'You're not going out for a week, because you've done this.' It has to be about someone disapproving, approving, showing them how they feel." The same holds true for younger children, noted Knowles.

Asked why she thinks restorative practices work, Hart said, "We get children in England coming into care who've been through the justice system—going

In June 2005, the Hertfordshire City Council Restorative Justice Project won the prestigious MJ (Municipal Journal) Looked After Children Achievement of the Year award. The MJ Awards recognize the best in local government services in the UK.

to court—and it's meaningless to them, because they don't have to take any responsibility. They can pay lip service and do their time and that's the end of it. They don't have to listen to someone saying, 'This is how you made me feel.' I can remember the worst thing that my parents could do to me wasn't sanctioning me, wasn't stopping my pocket money, it was telling me how I'd disappointed them. That's an awful feeling that you don't want repeated. If you can have a relationship with a child where the child feels that when you withdraw your approval for their behavior, it affects them, then you can enable some change. All the sanctioning and punishment in the world is not going to make that happen."

Knowles agreed, saying, "A lot of our young people when they come into care have really distorted views on how you relate to people—abusive experiences where they have found it very hard to make attachments. They've never had the opportunity to look at the impact of their behavior, or other's behavior. And probably nobody ever said 'sorry' to them before. This is showing them a different way. It isn't just about—every time you do something wrong, we're going to punish you, which is probably their past experience. It is—if you do something wrong, we're going to sort this out and make it better."

Hart related an anecdote about restorative practices at Stanfield. Two 16-year-old girls came in drunk one night. One girl became violent and twisted the

thumb of an agency worker, who reluctantly went to the hospital for treatment. A restorative conference was held after this incident. The young girl started out the conference cocky, blasé and uncaring. The worker broke down crying when she talked about going to the hospital for her injury. The last time she'd been in a hospital was 18 months earlier, when her son, who'd had a promising soccer career, had been in a car accident. The conference was cathartic for her—the first time she dealt with the pain of her son's accident. Filled with empathy for the woman, the girl burst into tears and apologized. This was a turning point for the girl, who is now back home and doing well, said Hart.

Knowles told a story about Hart, who was badly assaulted by a young man. "He'd assaulted several members of staff and we had to move him out for the night, because people couldn't manage his behavior. Ron went to see him the next day. She told him how she felt, how upset she'd been, how physically sore she was from what he'd done. He started off messing about, and she said, 'If you're not prepared to listen to me, I'm going to go now.' And he sat down and listened. And by the end of it he looked her in the eye and said, 'I really want to come back and I'm so, so sorry.' And she cried, and he cried. Now he's back, and he's really turned his behavior around."

A conference is planned to bring together staff with neighbors who live near the homes and object to the kids' presence. "They say things like, 'You should lock them in cages,'" said Knowles. She hopes that the conference will improve interaction with the community.

Veronica Hart will be a plenary speaker at the IIRP international conference, "The Next Step: Developing Restorative Communities," November 9-11, in Manchester, UK. For more information on the conference, please go to: <http://www.iirp.org/man05/index.html>.