

September 2009

# Action for Children briefing



## Research update: learning to climb high Finding new ways to support children and young people who have suffered the trauma of sexual abuse

Action for Children provides services across England and Wales to support children, young people and their families who have been affected by sexual abuse.

Through our experience of working with survivors of child sexual abuse, we believe that:

- every child has the right to be safe
- the support needs of children who have been sexually abused often go unmet, demand for therapeutic services far outstrips supply and the Government must improve the availability of therapeutic support
- work is needed to co-ordinate specialist training and advice for health, education and social care professionals to help them improve their responses
- early intervention will lessen the impact of the abuse on adult survivors

### The climbing group

Two therapists at Action for Children's child sexual abuse service Number 28 lead monthly climbing groups at an indoor centre with the help of an instructor. The aim is to build the children's inner resilience by providing an alternative space where a sense of mastery can be experienced.

The young people achieve their own individual goals and gain confidence through team working. It also offers a longer term life interest. Many of the children will have symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder and feel a disconnection from others or a dissociation with their own bodies.

There are a number of ways that this can be a positive therapeutic intervention:

### How does it work?

#### Taking controlled risks

The climbing group enables children to meet fear and anxiety in a supportive environment and learn ways to take care of themselves and attend to their own safety.

**The evidence:** Professor Michael Rutter<sup>1</sup> has written of the importance of 'exposure to controlled risk in resilience building' and Bessel Van der Kolk,<sup>2</sup> a trauma expert, believes:

'Complexly traumatized children need to be helped to engage their attention in pursuits that do not remind them of trauma-related triggers and that give them a sense of pleasure and mastery.'

1 Rutter, M (2007) 'Resilience, Competence, and Coping', *Child Abuse & Neglect*, Vol 31(3), pp. 205-209

2 Van der Kolk, B (2005) 'Developmental Trauma Disorder', *Psychiatric Annals*, 35:5, p 407



## Self-regulation

Climbing requires children to attend to their body and its position in space. They experience a sense of reliance on their body to make the moves to get them up the climbing wall.

**The evidence:** Difficulty with self-regulation stems from limited awareness about the physical and sexual boundaries that surround human interaction.<sup>3</sup>

Vander Ven's work on activity theory<sup>4</sup> showed that many skills including self-regulation can be developed in informal learning – social interaction with others as opposed to a formal classroom experience. Activity-based therapy also aids self-development, esteem, worth and affiliation.

## Touch

Climbing requires children to 'buddy up' with another person, to check readiness to climb and to check harnesses and knots. It relies on constant communication and a physical connection via the rope.

**The evidence:** A history of sexual abuse can make people avoid or become anxious about physical contact. Learning to climb involves some physical contact and is a vehicle to learn about safety and boundaries within the body.

## Groupwork

Social interaction can help to reduce the feelings of isolation, stigma and shame, and being part of a group can be beneficial.

**The evidence:** We know both abuse and trauma can result in a fear of intimacy and closeness. The climbing group is recognised as helping in the recovery process – children can be highly supportive to each other and recognise each other's pain.

<sup>3</sup> Perry, B D (2001) 'Keep the Cool in School: Self-Regulation – The Second Core Strength', *Early Childhood Today Magazine*, USA: Scholastic

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## Why is the programme being evaluated?

Initial feedback from the climbing group has indicated improvements in confidence, with young people feeling ready to engage with therapy.

Safe and Secure has therefore commissioned a formal evaluation from the Scottish Institute for Residential Child Care.

Journals and focus groups are being used to record the journey and stories of the group. Research objectives include:

- ▶ describing the characteristics of the staff and young people taking part
- ▶ describing the process and content of the climbing group experience
- ▶ analysing and evaluating the overall impact of taking part

## Key dates

The research will be published in February 2010.

## Talk to us

If you would like to be kept up to date with this research, please contact:

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