How 'Holding the Space' has transformed the atmosphere in Sunderland’s six children’s homes

Teenagers in children’s homes in Sunderland are feeling happier and safer and behaving much more calmly as the result of a new therapeutic approach being used by residential staff.

Called Holding the Space, the staff training programme encourages workers to think more psychologically about the young people in their care. Many have suffered severe trauma, abuse and neglect. They may arrive, after foster placement breakdown, displaying violent and unpredictable behaviour and struggling to make significant attachments. Under this new approach, they are encouraged to take responsibility for their behaviour and to make an attachment to their community.

Holding the Space has transformed the atmosphere in Sunderland's six children's homes. The daily routine used to be disrupted all too often by young people's aggressive behaviour, with staff frequently having to use physical restraint.

Today, the atmosphere is much calmer and physical restraint “just not something we need to do any more,” says Sharon Willis, manager of the Colombo Road children’s home, where the new approach was piloted. Staff now have much greater psychological understanding and better relationships with the young people in their care, she explains, “so they're in there dealing with the feelings behind the behaviour long before physical restraint becomes necessary.”

The new approach, based on therapeutic group work, was developed by staff at a local Action for Children project called The Kite, which has been providing therapy for abused children under an agreement with Sunderland council since the early 1990s.

“We were struggling to engage with young people from residential homes,” says Catherine Lennox of The Kite. “As a small team, we could not assign a therapist to all of the homes. So we set up Holding the Space to support workers in those homes and help young people as a community.”

The central element is the use of Council, where everyone living and working in the home meets at least once a week and shares their thoughts and feelings on an equal basis. They sit in a circle, with a candle in the centre, and undertake to speak from the heart, to listen in a non-judgmental way, to say only what is relevant, and to be spontaneous. Another key feature of the approach is the use of the creative arts as therapy.

Young people have shown an "incredible" response to being listened to and treated as equals, says Sharon Willis. "They talk about ‘feeling loved’ and ‘feeling safe’ – big words and feelings for kids who right up to their late teenage years have never felt any of these things."

The first Holding the Space training programme – 42 days over two years - started in 2007, with two members of staff from each of Sunderland's six homes taking part. Children's Services in Sunderland have shown their commitment to the training by writing it into their service plans and agreeing to fund it every two years.

“This is really of benefit,” says Nick Murphy, who manages services for looked after children in Sunderland. “It makes the experience of living in care a happy and positive one and enables young people to move through to adulthood and lead productive lives.”