Promotion of Positive Behaviour and Social Emotional Development in Institutional Care

The Case of One Home-Shelter in Latvia

Dita Nimante, University of Latvia, Riga, Latvia
Linda Daniela, University of Latvia, Riga, Latvia
Baiba Martinsone, University of Latvia, Riga, Latvia

ABSTRACT

Personnel working in institutional care have the important role of providing for the development of children who have experienced the trauma of being separated from their families. Personnel need to be emotionally responsive, able to form consistent, trusting, and long-term relationships with children, believe in them, support them in continuing education, and have high expectations for them. Despite these facts, there is no Latvian legal requirement for personnel working in institutional care to have a pedagogical education. This article describes the implementation of two professional in-service training programs: “Promotion of Positive Behaviour in Children with Institutional Care Experience” and “Social Emotional Development” in one children’s home-shelter and the effects of the programs at the level of personnel, children, and organization.

KEYWORDS
Institutional Care, Personnel In-Service Training, Positive Behaviour Support, Socioemotional Learning

INTRODUCTION

Institutional care in Latvia is under the regulation of the Ministry of Social Welfare. The Republic of Latvia does not officially require that personnel working in institutional care, even in children shelter-homes, to have a pedagogical education, despite the fact that they are working with children and their direct responsibility is the upbringing of children. Due to insufficient professional qualifications, personnel may lack basic knowledge about the development of children and pedagogical techniques. The lack of legal requirements has resulted in an approach to professional development that is entirely based on institutional priorities and understanding. The need for institutional care personnel to have professional pedagogical knowledge to support children was recognised by Ronald McDonald House Charities Latvia, a charity organization that works very closely with institutions across Latvia. This article describes efforts to increase pedagogical knowledge by adapting two professional in-service training programs: “Positive behaviour support” (PBS) and “Socioemotional learning” (SEL) for institutional care institution – the Children’s home-shelter. The project was financed by McDonald House Charities and by individuals who wished to support these efforts. The programs were used by the personnel working at Children’s home-shelter to promote a safe, emotional and physically beneficial, child-friendly environment in the institution.

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CHILDREN IN INSTITUTIONAL CARE IN LATVIA

Institutional care in Latvia is one of the common ways of caring for children who, for various reasons, are not able to live with their families. Although the number of children in institutions is decreasing every year, there are still too many children living there. For example, in 2004 there were 3,396 (0—17-year-old) children in institutional care (Kläsons et al., 2008), but in 2016, there were 1,225 children in institutional care (Bērni Latvijā [Children in Latvia], 2017).

On December 4, 2013, the Guidelines for the Development of Social Services for 2014-2020 were approved by the Cabinet of Ministers Decree No.589. One of the main directions of the guidelines was deinstitutionalisation. This concept refers to the process of developing community-based services, with family-like and child-friendly environments, including preventive measures to prevent the need for institutional care. The process of deinstitutionalisation has started in Latvia, but it will take some time to change the existing institutional care system. Legally, institutional care (in Latvia - social care institutions) provide housing, full care, and social rehabilitation to people who cannot take care of themselves, due to health, as well as orphans and children without parental care. In 2016 there were 45 such institutions. The Children’s institutional home-shelter where the in-service programs were studied is one of the 30 social care centres founded by local governments and other organisations, located 60 kilometres from the capital city of Latvia. In 2017, this home-shelter housed 35 children from ages 3 to 17.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

It is well-known and widely described in literature that children in institutional care face many challenges. Sudden loss of loved ones and separation from family can be traumatic events that threaten a child’s ability to cope. Many children living and growing up in institutional care have a complex history of trauma, such as physical and sexual abuse or witnessing domestic and community violence. The trauma and post trauma can influence children’s capacity to reach important developmental milestones in such domains as cognitive functioning, emotional regulation, and interpersonal relationships (National Child Traumatic Stress Network, 2012). Experiences of neglect can lead to developmental delays (Bati, 2017). The children face difficulties forming interpersonal relationships with others, emotional and behavioural problems can occur (Martin, Bott, Castellana, & Lancto, 2017). Children in institutional care have significantly higher rates of behavioural problems and more external locus of control than children living with their families. Behavioural problems may partially stem from a sense of a lack of control over their lives (Król, Kliś, Kustra, & Szmyńska, 2018). Youth that are placed in institutional care have lower locus of control. They may not feel as though they have much control over their external world and they have limited positive support from adults (Quisenberry & Foltz, 2013). Children’s reactions to trauma can vary based on their coping responses, which can be both negative and positive (Riebschleger, Day, & Damashek, 2015). One common component to helping traumatised children is developing positive, healthy, and meaningful relationships between children and adult caregivers. Caregivers should help children develop internal strengths and skills to cope with challenges. Interventions should focus on fostering trusting and healthy relationships with adults (Quisenberry & Foltz, 2013). Adults should teach children positive coping strategies. It is important that children engage in decision-making about their lives as well (Quisenberry & Foltz, 2013). Adults should also prioritise education and have high expectations for children (Montserrat, Casas, & Malo, 2013). Therefore, the role of institutional care personnel is significant. Institutions with adequate social, health, and nutritional support that meet children’s basic needs is not enough, there should be emotionally responsive personnel who are able to form consistent and long-term relationships with children, who believe in them, support them in continuing education, have high expectations for them.
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