



Meeting the challenge of COVID-19

Learning and practice



How Tall Trees home found ways to form stronger relationships during lockdown

What was the challenge faced?

The COVID-19 pandemic lockdowns brought many challenges for both the young people and staff at Tall Trees, where four male young people between the ages of 12 and 19 live, some of whom have been there for several years and are proud to call it their home. The young people residing in Tall Trees have been subject to extremely chaotic early year's experiences and this has understandably affected their individual emotional and social well-being. As a professional and sincere team, they endeavour to ensure our young people receive the love and nurture they may have missed as a child.

Social distancing meant close contact within the home, which thrives on 'lots of hugs', was no longer possible and staff had to think differently. Meals could no longer be taken around the table together, and the close relationships between peers, and between the young people and the staff who look after them, had the potential to suffer. Finding a new approach to maintaining and growing relationships became an important challenge.

What change in practice took place?

During this period, the young people easily and understandably, became frustrated and confused and found it challenging and difficult to comprehend why all these changes were necessary. Changes to daily routines justifiably caused anxieties, the young people in Tall Trees had 100% school attendance record and as well as being educated, liked to spend time there with friends.

The young people were offered a 'fidget box' with items belonging to staff which they could look at and hold, when they were in need of comfort or if behaviour was becoming challenging and they required support to de-escalate. This was particularly helpful when staff were self-isolating under the COVID-19 rules, or when they were off duty. The boxes contain a variety of transitional objects - chosen possessions that offer security and comfort, that they recognised as belonging or relating to a particular staff member, such as a soft toy scented with a particular perfume, a keyring, or a piece of jewellery. The residential manager always carries a set of keys, so an old set of keys was placed in the box of one young person so that they could feel close to the manager when she was not around.

The boxes also contain colouring books and fidget toys. The young people further developed and accessed 'thermometer charts' with their own key worker in the staff group during this time, using their own words to explain their feelings, and these were used to start conversations and help both of them understand each other better.

When the young people were unable to attend school and had to remain indoors, routine and structure became even more essential, and working with the young people's daily schedules were put on a whiteboard for everyone to see. The schedule included exercise sessions with Joe Wicks, schoolwork, break times, activities and what would be served for lunch and dinner. A variety of educational board games were bought for times when concentration was starting to flag, and staff opened a tuck shop offering small treats, providing each young person with a weekly allowance to spend – this helped develop money management skills and helped one young person with his maths, as he worked out the cost of items and the change he would be given. With staff ensuring the house was kept immaculate at all times, the young people were also encouraged to help with simple chores such as sanitising their phones and laptops, and making their own beds, as well as cooking meals with staff.

Who was involved in making the change?

Everyone in the home came together to make the changes that worked well for what the young people needed.

What difference did this change make?

The changes put in place, including a focus on 'togetherness' brought the young people much closer to each other and to staff and decreased general anxiety levels and worries caused by the COVID-19 lockdowns. Less daily transitions meant less stress. The young people began to spend more time together in social areas rather than in their own rooms, and real friendships have developed. The planners, fidget boxes, playing board games, and cooking meals with staff all remain in place. After helping develop menus and cooking, one of the young people has chosen to go to college with the hope that he can eventually become a chef. He is now living at Tall Trees in Continuing Care and has the security of staying in Tall Trees, which he refers to as home, while at college. The boys have continued to participate in the house chores too, receiving extra pocket money for their help. The relationships between them are stronger than ever.

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