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## Book Review

# **An Essential Guide to Surviving and Thriving in Residential Childcare: Lessons from the frontline on how you'll laugh, love and cry... all before lunchtime**

**By Jane Dalglish**

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*An Essential Guide to Surviving and Thriving in Residential Childcare* is explicitly aimed at residential childcare workers. As I am a researcher, not a residential childcare worker, it is legitimate to ask why I am reviewing this book. In my role I have been involved in numerous research projects that relate in one way or another to care experience, including two specifically focussed on residential childcare. One of these was an ethnography, where I spent a lot of time in one particular setting over the course of a year. I genuinely felt changed by relationships that I developed during that project, leaving with a deep respect for the young people and adults there and in residential childcare more broadly. So, when I read the title and summary of the book, I was intrigued to learn about the insights of a very experienced worker and to see where my own, more limited, understanding sat in relation that.

The title indicates two things about working in residential childcare: that it can be challenging (survival) and rewarding (thriving). The book does a good job at addressing these two aspects of the work, with much more



emphasis on how to create the conditions that allow both young people and adults to thrive, while not shying away from challenges that arise from the experiences of young people, some working environments, and the wider systems and structural context within which residential childcare sits.

*An Essential Guide to Surviving and Thriving in Residential Childcare* is written in an informal, conversational style, and strikes me as a very personal book for the author, Jane Dalglish, who introduces herself, her family, and many young people and adults that she has worked with over her 26-year career in this sector. It is, therefore, unsurprising that relationships are identified as the key idea in the introduction, which gives an outline of topics covered and is motivational in tone (as is much of the book).

Eleven chapters follow the introduction, starting with relationships (of course) and covering a wide range of themes, including culture, belonging, life story work, safety, trauma, education, and aspiration. There are some variations in the structure of chapters but all include subsections on specific topics relating to the theme of the chapter, such as 'what does this mean for us?' boxes that summarise messages for practice, and 'theories that help us understand' boxes that lightly introduce theoretical concepts to help workers think through what might be happening for both young people and themselves. Many include stories from practice and suggested tools or approaches. For example, in chapter 5, the author breaks down the journey through residential childcare in terms of how young people may be feeling at different points and how workers can develop relationships and intervene in different ways at different times. Later in the chapter she introduces specific life journey tools including timelining, memory boxes, river of life exercises, and digital storybooks.

In the introduction, Dalglish paraphrases the words of a young person's testimonial to say, 'Young people don't need perfect; they need real' (p.7) and I think that applies to this book. It's not perfect, but it is real. Several key messages stood out to me, including the need for space and safety so that workers in residential childcare can reflect deeply on the work that they do. Joy is something I think about a lot in relation to my experiences of residential childcare (and is something I am currently writing about



with a colleague), so I was pleased to see that it is discussed many times throughout the book.

Reading the book from start to finish in one go, I did find some of the structural choices disrupted the flow of reading. Lots of short subsections broke up the text and were not always very clearly linked to the overall theme of the chapter (e.g. the play section in chapter 3). The argument that safety is foundational to everything else (including relationship and intervention) was strong and convincing but made me wonder why it didn't come up until chapter 6. However, busy residential childcare workers may well dip in and out of the book, such that this structure may work well for them.

Many theories are introduced throughout the book, and these are considered in a 'light' way. I think this is the right approach here because *An Essential Guide to Surviving and Thriving in Residential Childcare* is about practice and is not intended to be theory heavy. Moreover, theories are directly linked to practice examples, helping the reader to see how they can apply to their experiences. However, they are introduced uncritically, which potentially leaves room for the arguments based on them to be undermined. Even a short sentence or two about some of the limits or weaknesses of concepts and theories would let the reader know that these are acknowledged. For example, the use of attachment styles in chapter 4 appears to consider anxious and avoidant attachment styles on a par with the disorganised attachment style. In chapter 10, there is a discussion about the topic of dreams in the sense of having aspirations for the future, but it cites Freud's work on dream interpretation, which is about the dreams we have while sleeping (and which has been subject to robust critiques from modern sleep scientists).

Overall, I think that this book will be of interest and use to those working in (or thinking about working in) residential childcare. I can easily see chapters and subsections being used to aid reflection and discussion in supervision, team meetings, and training and development work. Its value and authority come from its firsthand perspective and the ways in which the topics discussed are directly linked to practice using stories about young people and adults who have lived and worked in residential childcare. It has reminded me of the amazing work that goes on in this sector, and the challenges and opportunities that it presents for young people and adults alike.



## About the review author

Dr Andrew Burns is the research lead for the Association of Fostering, Kinship and Adoption Scotland, a research fellow at the University of Edinburgh, and an associate tutor at the University of Glasgow. He previously worked as a research fellow at the University of Stirling.

The publisher (Pavilion Publishing) supplied a copy of this book for review.

