

AGE ASSESSMENT TRAINING

PETE GRADY
LIVERPOOL JOHN MOORES
UNIVERSITY

NORTHWEST CONSORTIUM

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Introduction

Welcome to the Age Assessment Training for social workers. This course aims to enable you to reflect on your current awareness of and practice with separated children who are subject to immigration control, and hopefully to identify how you may develop a model of practice that incorporates current thinking about age determination with a person-centred approach to vulnerable children.

The course is based around a method of participative learning and encourages participants to engage throughout the duration with the key ideas and exercises that are presented to improve age assessment practice.

Learning Outcomes

The course has a number of learning outcomes that we shall seek to achieve by the end of the 2 days these are:

Participants should be able to

- Locate age in specific cultural and social concepts
- Identify how approaches to Age Determination should reflect these concepts
- Identify key aspects of current arrangements for age assessment used in UK
- Demonstrate an understanding of the implications of trauma and resilience for Age Determination practice.

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Plan for the Training

Day 1 (9.30 – 4.00)

9.30 Introductions, Expectations and Concerns

Age as a Concept

Coffee

Age Assessment in Context / Proforma

Summary

12.30 Lunch

Age Assessment Process - Approaches

Coffee

Discussion on Current Policy

Summary

4.00 Close

Day 2 (9.30 – 3.15)

9.30 Review and Planning for the day
 Developing Models of Good Practice
 Coffee
 Experiences of Age Assessment

12.30 Lunch

 Taking things forward

 Summary, Questions and Evaluation

3.15 Close

Introduction, Expectations and Concerns

This course is designed to explore the concept of Age Assessment and its use in practice to determine the age of Separated Children. It should help you to reflect on your own practice and that of your team and organisation. It begins by assuming that we are all anxious about engaging with age assessment processes and that sometimes we need to name those anxieties in order to deal with them.

The first exercise is very much a personal one which is designed to encourage you to think about what your expectations and concerns are for this course.

You will not have to share any of the expectations or concerns that you write here, if you don't want to.

Take a few minutes to think about why you have come today and what you might want to get out of the experience, and try and complete the following:

My expectations for this course are:

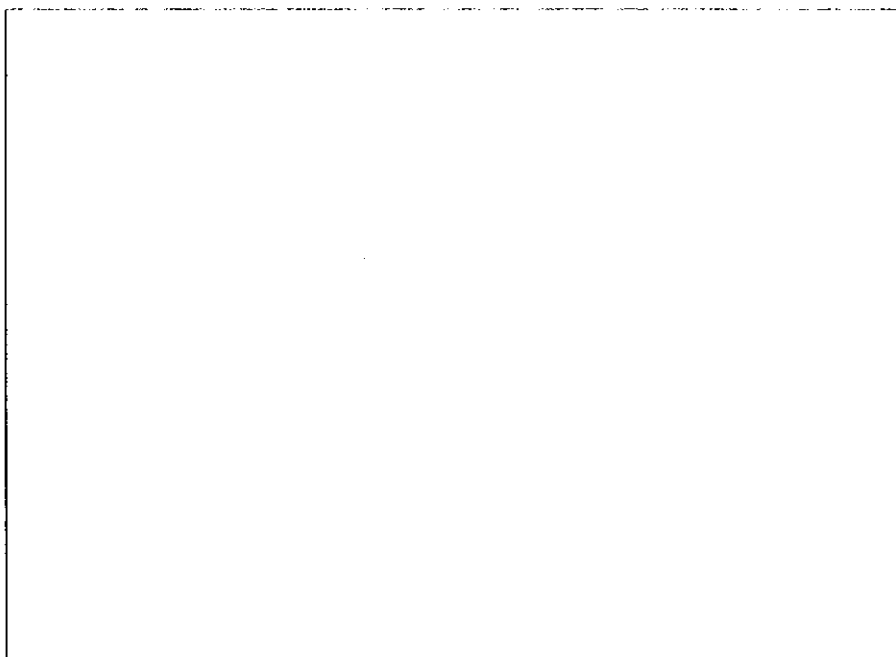
Now think about things that you might be worried about in relation to this course, either in terms of what you might have to do, or things that you are bringing, try and complete the following:

My concerns for this course are:

Finally think about ground rules that will be important for you to be able to participate fully in this course:

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Ground rules agreed by the group for this training

A large, empty rectangular box with a thin black border, intended for the group to write down their agreed-upon ground rules for the training.

Section 1

Age as a Concept

Reflecting on Age as a concept

In order to get in touch with issues about age and age assessment begin with the following exercise.

Exercise 1

On your own

On the enclosed post its write down two facts that relate to the day that you were born. Keep these to your self at the moment.

Fact 1

Fact 2

In pairs

Share your facts with your partner - without telling them any other information can they determine how old you are and what your birthday is?

How easy was this to do?

Did you get it right?

In sixes

Consider the following questions:

How easy was it for you to guess the age of your partner?

How easy was it to guess their date of birth?

How useful were the facts that they gave you?

Can you identify any patterns in the facts – certain types or kinds of information that is being given?

In the large group we will come together and try to put all of the facts that we have on to a time line

Key issues

In the big group

Feedback on the above questions – look at the kinds of information that is available.

Stick the post-it's onto a timeline

As we begin to develop the timeline. Are there any patterns emerging about the types of facts that people have used or the ease with which they can be positioned on the timeline

Patterns
Ease

The question is:

Is it easy to determine someone's age on the basis of facts about their birthday?

What factors do we use when we are thinking about peoples age or date of birth?

Factors that we might use when thinking about Age or Date of birth

The Rules of Age

Think about what the 'rules' are when it comes to age in the UK can you think of three formal and three informal rules about age?

Formal Rules	Informal Rules
- Drinking	
- Driving	
- Voting	

- Marriage
Some key ideas

- language/dress

Age is chronological and socially constructed.

Social Age is important in establishing appropriate relationships with those around us

How we conceptualise age becomes an important aspect of our relations with others within our own culture, it does not always make sense in another context.

Being aware of some of these issues has relevance for Age Determination processes.

Section 2

Age Assessment in Context / Proforma

What is the purpose of Age Determination in the current policy context?

Large Group

To give a definite age to an asylum seeker

To enable someone to access services

To locate people in the appropriate element of the immigration process



Sixes

How is Age assessment different from other forms of Assessment that we might engage in?

How is it done?

Where is it done?

Who does it?

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But it is different from other forms of assessment because:

It is based on limited and disputed evidence
it requires confidence in our ability to engage with young people
outside of familiar boundaries

Pairs>Sixes>Group

How should we approach Age Assessment?

What key factors do you take into account when undertaking Age Assessment with young people?

C.P Interpretes.

What are your concerns about age assessment that are different to other assessments you may be involved in?

- Trust with Y.P
- Invasive questions

What strengths do you have in terms of undertaking assessments in general?

In terms of age assessment in particular?

Sixes

Why are the following important when undertaking Age Assessment as a consequence of the Merton Judgement?

The concept of fairness?

Who should carry out assessments?

What evidence must be used

The rights of the subject of the assessment

and how might these impact upon your practice?

Some conclusions:

The way that we approach age assessment is important, Merton demonstrates the limitation of practice when it is not focussed on the individual young person and their rights.

How we engage in the process might be determined by a number of factors including our confidence with the subject, their background and our experience of assessment.

What do you think are the factors that might be strengths in your practice?

What are the deficits?

How might you develop practice to account for these?

The Current Age Assessment Format:

(Hard copy available for reference)

Some Issues about Age Assessment

- Assessment comes out of P.B. 33
- Is designed to meet the needs of Home Office rather than social work
- Provides limited guidance on completing assessment – often restating material used elsewhere
- Is a block to effective practice

How can we use it in practice?

- How can we develop practice using this format?
- What links are there to the Assessment Framework?
- How can we identify strengths of our practice in relation to these?

In sixes.

Take one section of the age assessment format:

Interaction During Assessment
Social History and Family Composition
Developmental Consideration
Education
Independent / Self care Skills

Think about what kinds of knowledge you already have about this topic, and from what sources.

Try to list at least 5 questions you might ask to gain an idea of the age of a young person

Record them here:

Area of Age Assessment: _____

Knowledge you already have	Questions you might ask

Can you identify any issues about the area of age assessment that you have considered? Is it easy to think of questions that would enable you to uncover someone's age in this area?

How might you also summarise any issues which are not necessarily linked to specific questions, but rather an interpretation of how someone communicates with you?

Types of Questions

Moving on from thinking about the questions that you would ask can you work in your group to think about how you might ask them?

What kinds of questions might you ask, what about pace, repetition etc?

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Making Links to Other Assessments

It is often easier to make sense of the assessment by linking it to other areas of knowledge that we might have, for example other assessments:

Age Assessment

- Physical Appearance
- Interaction
- Social History
- Developmental Considerations
- Education
- Independence
- Health

Framework Categories

- Health / social presentation
- Social presentation / Emotional & Behavioural Development
- Family History, Family and Social Development
- Emotional and Behavioural Development / Presentation
- Education
- Independence
- Health

What are your strengths in relation to the Assessment framework – what knowledge or skills do you have that you can use for Age Assessment?

Areas of concern

- Age Assessment lacks the context of other Assessments
- We feel deskilled by a lack of knowledge and cultural competence in working with asylum seekers
- We are often unsure about how to find out about peoples culture and background

How might we approach the issue of Age Assessment in ways that encourage confidence in our own skills and enable us to offer a quality service to the young people with whom we work?

Reflecting on the Guidance

How might this guidance support your practice?

What might you do to adapt some of the elements of this guidance for your own practice?

What areas of the guidance might be more difficult to adapt into your practice?

Section 3

Discussion on Current Policy

It is important to consider the current policy context in which the age assessment proforma has been developed; this includes an awareness of key policy documents that are generated both within and outside of the social care arena.

This session will review participant knowledge of current policy arrangements and highlight key issues for considering the completion of age assessments within this context.

Concluding thoughts for Day 1

What have you learned today that will enhance your practice?

What have we thought about today that you want to know more about?

What would you like to move on to tomorrow?

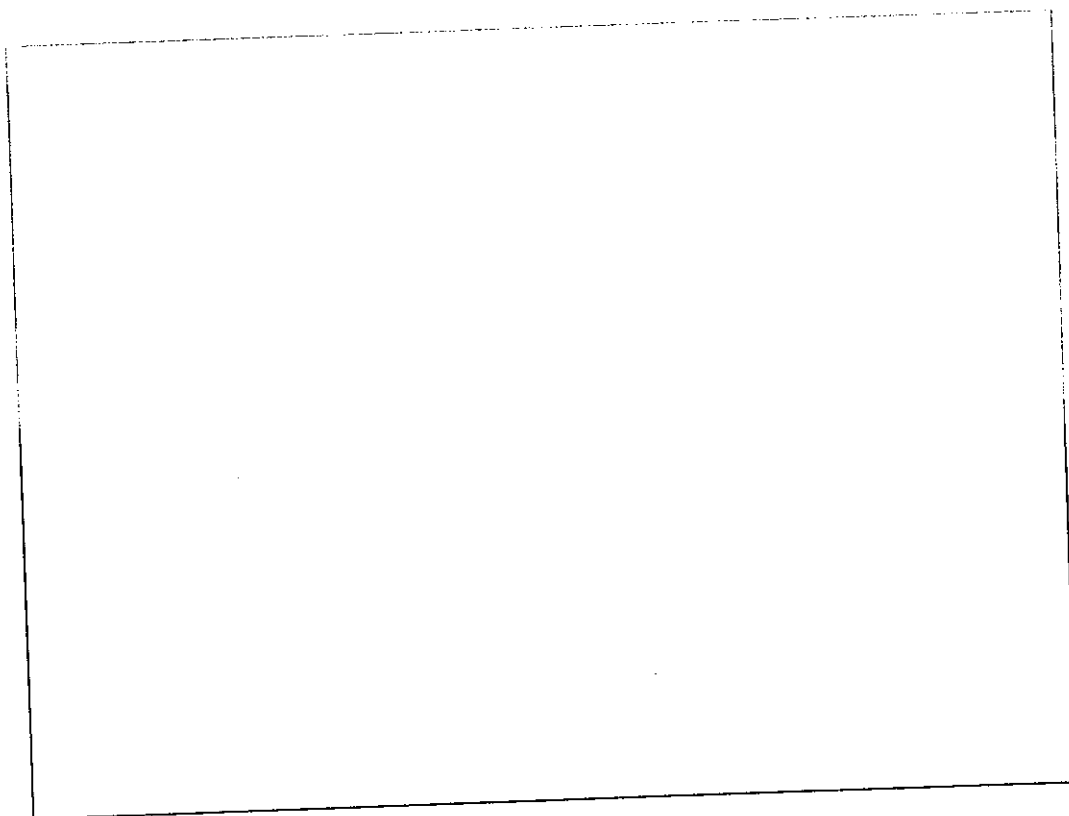
Age Assessment

Day 2

Planning for the day

Today will be focussed on developing good practice principles for undertaking Age Assessment. This will include thinking about some of the bigger issues for Age Assessment within the context of Europe and approaches to immigration and Asylum from some very different perspectives.

Are there any other things that you might want to get out of today that will not be already covered:

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Section 4

Developing Models of Good Practice for Age Assessment

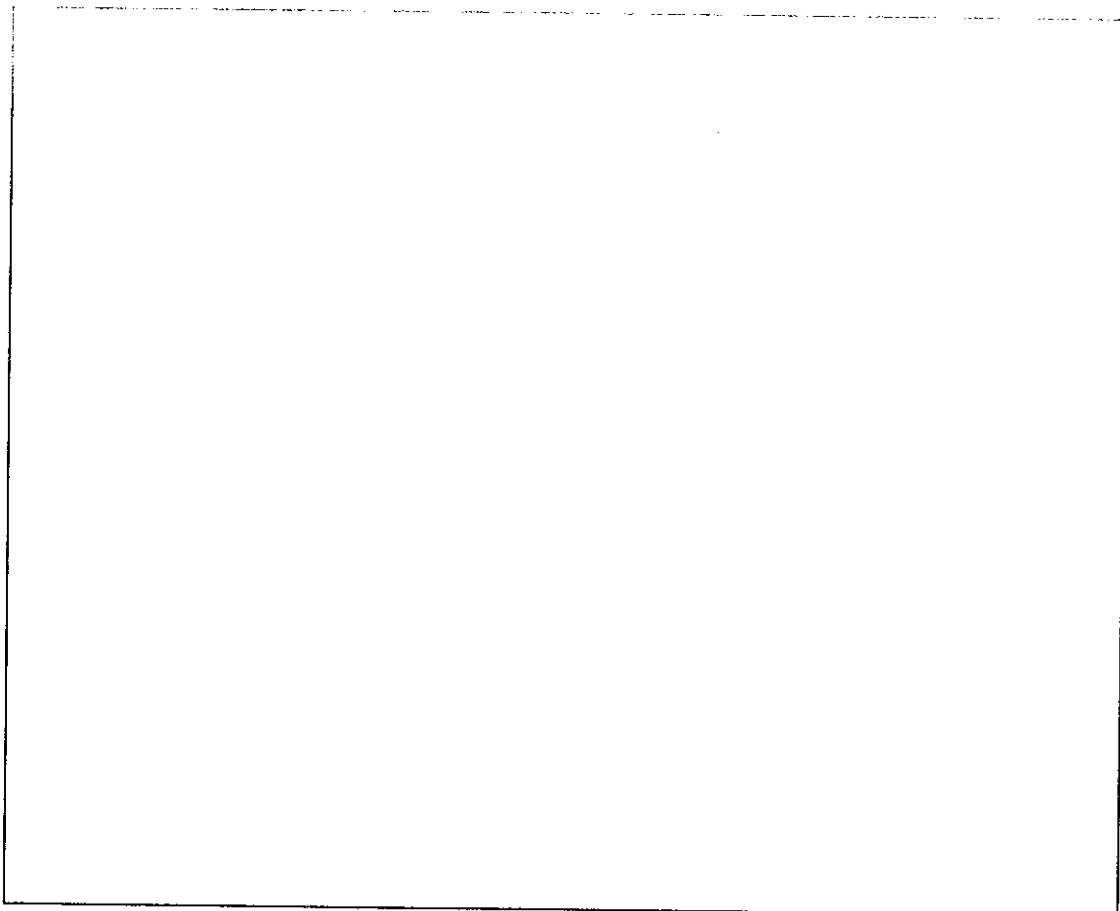
Age assessment poses many problems to those who have to undertake it, particularly around the need to produce assessments that achieve definite outcomes.

There is always a tension between 'truth' and possible conclusions of an assessment – they are not necessarily the same things and it is important to realise this.

Developing a good practice approach to Age Assessment

How can we approach assessment in a way that enables the young person to participate fully and to present their experiences in a meaningful way?

In your groups think about how you might describe an approach to age assessment that enables participation and establishing a realistic outcome

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When we consider Age Assessment we also need to consider the structures that fit around it to enable young people to participate, some research undertaken by the Separated Children in Europe Project identified how particular factors might help or hinder children and young people in the process of engaging with services:

Factors that might Indicate Risk in young people:

- Exposure to violence
- Identification with those who have perpetrated violence
- Loss of parents / carers
- Anxieties or keeping secrets
- Not being able to mourn
- Not allowed to cope with change
- Experience of arrival in a new culture
- Exposure to racism and isolation

Risk includes children not being able to communicate effectively with those around them, a reluctance to engage with agencies and professionals as well as risk of long term psychological harm, Many children identified as uncooperative or resistant were found to be suffering from PTSD, official working with them often failed to recognise this.

Factors that might encourage resilience

- Acceptance of previous experiences
- Experiences strengthened by leading a 'normal' life
- Care provided is appropriate to age and expectations of young person
- Accessing social networks
- Being in school and with other children
- Being able to access familiar cultural healing processes

Resilience was an essential part of children's experiences, being able to develop patterns of life that encouraged resilience enabled them to adjust to their surroundings and engage with those working with them. The impact of psychological distress was generally reduced for these children.

How might you develop ways of working with children and young people who are seeking asylum that accounts for these different factors?

Things we might do to support young people

The impact of silence

Ravi Kohli, in his article 'The Sound of Silence: Listening to What Unaccompanied Asylum-seeking Children Say and Do Not Say' explores some of the issues that relate to how we understand silence in children and young people. He identifies a number of key themes:

Silence might be for a number of reasons:

The trauma of separation might mean that the past is forgotten
Silence may mean that the past is being healed and the future is more possible
Young people may be told not to talk by agents or family because they will be more successful.

All of these may be true, we need to think about how we ourselves deal with silence for young people when we are conducting age assessment - is it purposeful and part of the process or is it indicative of something else.

(Kohli also identifies three roles that those working with young people might take on:

Practical helpers – moving things on
Therapeutic listeners - taking time to listen and reflect
Trusted companions – forming strong relationships over time)

Kohli suggest that all three roles are required for young people, but that we are often not clear how we fit into the needs of the young people concerned.

Developing good practice

In terms of age assessment we need to think about how we develop a model of assessment that reflects young people's needs:

Valuing the journey(s) they have made so far

Giving them time and space to tell a story

Taking time and keeping things calm

Being open to cultural issues and sensitive to areas of concern for the young person

In a way that acknowledges our own role and style with the young person.

We can do this by thinking of some key issues:

Understanding - does the young person understand what is going on?
What the purpose of the assessment is?

Context - where does age assessment take place, who is present?
How will interpretation be managed? Are you confident with the interpreter involved, do they know what they need to do?

Timescales - how long will this take, how many sessions?

Methods - how will you undertake the assessment, what kinds of questions will you ask? Will you use direct or indirect questions, circular questioning, will you go back over the same information and explain why?

Information - what happens to the information, what if the young person changes their information, is this seen as a good or bad thing? Will you tell them that you still believe them?

Outcomes - will the young person know what the outcomes are, will you share with them your assessment and its conclusions, can they comment on it, can they change it?

On your own

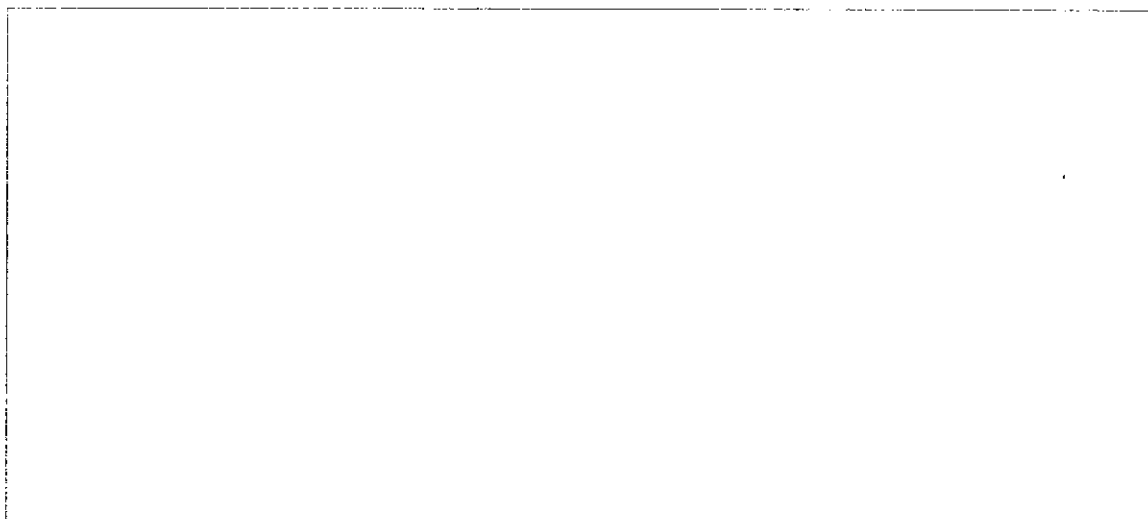
Identify 5 things that you consider to be good practice in terms of completing age assessments with separated young people

In pairs

Identify 3 things that you have agreement on in terms of good practice

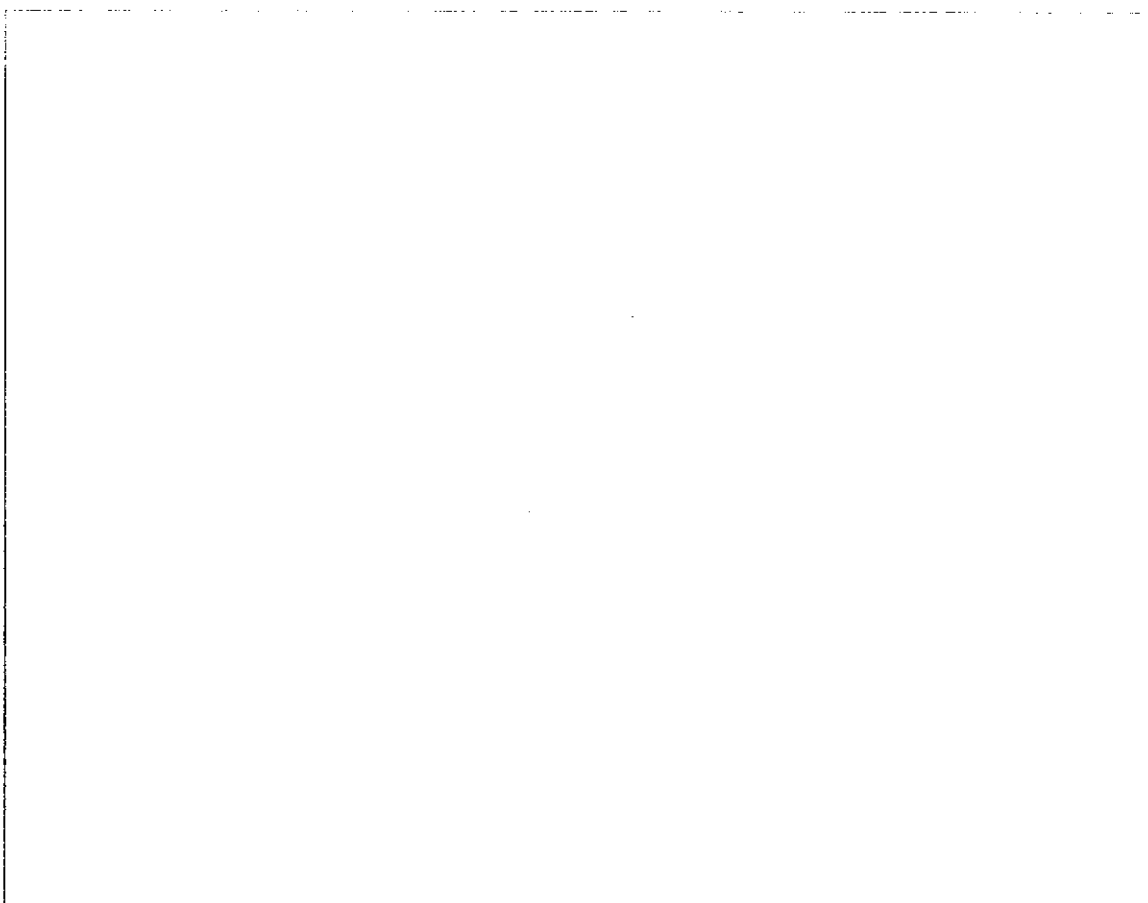
In sixes

Identify 5 things that you can all agree on



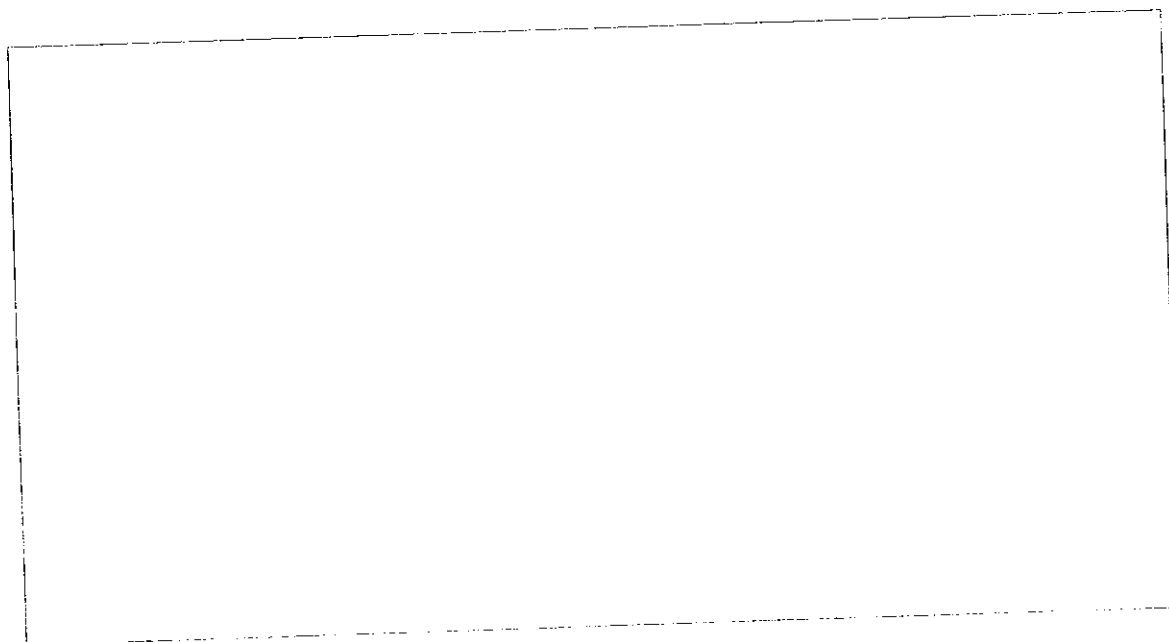
Whole group

Complete a list of good practice issues for age assessment



Personal Planning

Can you identify from this list three things that you can do to improve your practice in this area:

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Try and develop a personal action plan in order to achieve this.

Closing Thoughts

The purpose of this training is to develop your ideas about how to engage effectively with age assessment in the context of practice with separated children.

It was built around identified learning outcomes:

Participants should be able to

- Locate age in specific cultural and social concepts
- Identify how approaches to Age Determination should reflect those concepts
- Identify key aspects of current arrangements for age assessment used in UK
- Demonstrate an understanding of the implications of trauma and resilience for Age Determination practice.

And at the beginning of day 1, you wrote down some expectations and concerns about the programme as a whole.

Take some time to think about these now, where your expectations achieved and do you feel that you have got the most out of this course; was there anything else that you wanted to achieve?

Thank you for taking part in the programme and contributing to the exercises etc.

Pete Grady

Notes

Notes

Herby et al

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Promoting psychosocial well-being in unaccompanied asylum seeking young people in the United Kingdom

Ravi Kohli* and Rosie Mather†

*Principal Lecturer in Social Work, Middlesex University, Enfield, UK, and †Family Welfare Association YAS project, Worthing, UK

Correspondence:

Ravi Kohli,
School of Health and Social Sciences,
Middlesex University,
Queensway, Enfield,
Middlesex EN3 4SE,
UK
E-mail: r.kohli@mdx.ac.uk

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ABSTRACT

Unaccompanied minors looking for asylum in industrialized nations come with a host of psychosocial needs associated with separation and settlement. They are also resourceful, and willing to make the best of themselves in their new environments. This paper reviews literature concerning vulnerability and resilience that has emerged from refugee related studies, and those from social work with children looked after by local authorities. In combining these two areas of enquiry, the paper tests the messages they contain in reference to the work of a young asylum seekers project run in the United Kingdom. It confirms the view that unaccompanied minors are children first and foremost, exhibiting understandable vulnerabilities associated with separation and trauma, as well as being carriers of capacities that can help them to recover and settle after arrival. In this paper, it is proposed that promoting psychosocial well-being for unaccompanied minors involves entering the young people's inner and outer worlds with therapeutic care, to aid the processes of self-recovery. It also involves finding ways to regenerate a lost sense of belonging and of being in charge of their lives. Examples from the project's work with the young people are used to illustrate the complexity of helping them find a sense of home within their new territories.

INTRODUCTION

Children coming alone to Western Europe from countries across the world become separated from their families for a number of reasons. Traditionally, armed conflict and persecution are cited as major factors leading to departure (Ayotte & Williamson 2001). But there are other reasons. Some children leave their country of origin because of economic hardship resulting from fragmentation after armed conflict. Some move because of trafficking for the purposes of sexual exploitation or other illicit and illegal activities. A few escape from dangerous families or kinship networks. While the reasons for departure differ, what unites the children is a sense of getting away from harm, and seeking asylum in countries that are far away from their roots, either geographically or culturally.

When they arrive in unfamiliar contexts, they have to deal with a bewildering set of circumstances. They have to cross three psychological barriers. Firstly, as 'strangers in a strange land', they may not know the habits, rules and customs of their new territories, and have to adapt quickly and fluently in order to settle. Secondly, they may be carrying memories of disintegration following war and be traumatized or haunted by ghosts from the past. They have to depend on the comfort and skills of strangers to make peace with these ghosts. Thirdly, if they are looked after by social services in the country of asylum, they have to find their way through a maze of systems of care and protection, having been through the immigration maze. Making their way through these mazes is known to be hard enough for indigenous children (Fisher *et al.* 1986; Packman & Hall 1998), but unaccompanied minors

enter them without knowing whether their claims for citizenship will succeed.

Given these three stressors these children often experience a series of fractures in their past, present and future lives that need to be healed. At the point of arrival, their sense of being in charge of their lives is seriously jeopardized. Having the comfort of belonging to someone, or somewhere, is known to sustain psychological well-being (Krause 1997), yet for these children circumstances have conspired to peel away the layers of connection, leaving them exposed and vulnerable in their new environments. In Kohli's (2000) research with social workers that care for these children, one young man said to his social worker that he had 'lost the steering wheel to his life'. The challenge for welfare professionals in these situations is to help the separated child find not just the steering wheel, but a sense of direction and a safe road to travel along in their journey of belonging, in a way that allows them to take charge of their past, present and future experiences. In reference to promoting psychosocial well-being, Howe *et al.* (1999) confirm that:

[t]he complex interplay between the past and the present, the psychological inside and the social outside, is the dance that practitioners have to understand if they are to make sense of what is going on and intervene appropriately and effectively. (Howe *et al.* 1999, p. 4)

In this paper we illustrate this dance for unaccompanied asylum seeking young people. These illustrations are used to illuminate their particular and distinctive circumstances as they search for settlement in the United Kingdom. Examples of practice are drawn from the work of a young asylum seekers project in the south of England (YAS) that provides a service to some of the steadily increasing numbers of children and young people who arrive alone in this country to seek asylum. In September 2002 the local social services department was assisting some 350 unaccompanied young asylum seekers who had arrived from a wide range of countries. In 1998, various agencies involved in working with these young people became concerned that the emotional needs arising from experiences of loss, bereavement, flight and sometimes torture were not being met. Some young people were experiencing mental health problems or difficulties in coping with day to day living. These agencies then approached a long established voluntary sector organization providing a range of mental health and family support services in the UK. A multiagency partnership approach was used to set up the project,

which began its work in July 2000 funded by the European Commission and the Diana Princess of Wales Memorial Fund. The services provided aimed to:

- help the young people make sense of what happened to them in the past;
- help them to identify and use their own capabilities and skills in integrating into their new environments;
- provide opportunities for learning new skills that would assist them to find emotional and practical stability, either in the UK or on return to their countries of origin;
- connect them to helpful people within their informal and formal networks of care, so that they were not isolated, and could be accompanied in their journeys towards settlement.

The young people using the project come from 15 nations, nine of which are African. Of these, there are relatively large representations from Sierra Leone and Nigeria. There are also significant numbers from Afghanistan and Kosovo. The vast majority do not have permission to remain within the UK for an extended period. A few have refugee status. Temporary Admission has been granted to many, while the authorities investigate their asylum claims. Where gender is noted, young men appear twice as frequently as young women amongst those making frequent usage of both structured and informal activities. This reflects the local and national picture of many more young men than young women seeking asylum within the UK. The majority of the young people are in the 16 to 18 year age group, which is in line with the general profile of young asylum seekers in the area. They are accommodated in foster families, residential units and hostels, or in shared houses and flats rented by social services.

In the planning and provision of services, the YAS project has been organized in reference to what is known about vulnerabilities associated with becoming a refugee. Equally importantly, taking account of their resilience matters to the young people themselves. The image of 'victims of trauma' is a small part of a broader picture. Within the panorama, workers observe ruggedness, hope and creativity alongside great pain. As the project's work has grown, young people search out ways of balancing vulnerability with resilience as part of the process of settlement and psychosocial well-being. The project has evolved from a position of viewing 'mental health difficulties' as a set of prescribed, diagnostically based terms associated with trauma, to a more 'holistic' approach, that

takes their strengths and hopes into account, as well as their fears and worries. The workers' own journey, therefore, runs alongside that of the young people, in creating a complex and safe set of interventions that aid the process of settlement.

REFUGEE CHILDREN: MESSAGES FROM RESEARCH ABOUT VULNERABILITY AND RESILIENCE

The following section reviews some key messages from research about vulnerability and resilience in relation to refugee children, before describing the project's work. Research findings relevant to the work are blended from several sources within the refugee field, as well as those that have emerged from research into the care and resettlement of indigenous look-alike children. The young people come, as William Utting (1997) said about children living away from home, from *People Like Us*, ordinary people making difficult decisions in testing circumstances. Research undertaken by Stone (2000) also confirms that refugee children are children first and foremost, who come with sets of needs and capacities that all vulnerable children carry in their search for sanctuary. So the project's work takes account of them as children and young people in need of protection and care, not just refugees in search of asylum.

Vulnerability and refugee children

Vulnerability arises through coming face to face with traumatic events. For children and young people who become refugees, the effects of war or natural disasters are punishing in various ways. They may, as Petty & Jareg (1998) note, have been through exceptionally troubling experiences, including witnessing the deaths of close family members, or torture and sexual assault of parents, siblings and friends. They may themselves have participated in acts of violence. Summerfield (1998) emphasizes that those forced into exile experience 'a rupture in the narrative threads running through their lives' (p. 16). Far more than indigenous children entering local authority care, who experience a dislocation of the threads of connection between themselves and their families, unaccompanied minors may have lost the whole collective plot by living through 'total war', where

...mass terror becomes a deliberate strategy. Destruction of schools, houses, religious buildings, fields and crops as well as torture, rape and internment become commonplace. Modern warfare is concerned not only to destroy life, but also ways

of life. It targets social and cultural institutions and deliberately aims to undermine the means whereby people endure and recover from the suffering of war. (Bracken & Petty 1998, p. 3)

Yule's (1998) research into the impact of such events on refugee children can be summarized in the following ways:

- Children are troubled by repetitive, intrusive thoughts about the traumatic event or events, particularly at times when they are quiet or reflective. Flashbacks, sleep disturbance and recurring nightmares are widespread.
- Difficulties in concentration are reported, especially in schoolwork, as well as memory problems in grasping new material and remembering old skills.
- They carry a *sense of a foreshortened future*, finding it difficult to plan, or *survivor's guilt*, being disorientated by their own good fortune in comparison to those who were left behind or killed. Life is experienced as fragile.

Montgomery (1998) reviews the literature in relation to age specific responses to war, and demonstrates that pre-school children may act regressively, with clingy behaviour and heightened anxiety when left alone or with strangers, and that their adolescent counterparts may act aggressively, towards themselves and others, or enter pseudo-mature adulthood before their time, particularly in coping with younger siblings. In noting that 'the central character of trauma is that of disconnection', Melzak (1995) confirms that refugee children often show uneven development, in that they appear to have both strengths characteristics of older children and vulnerability characteristics of younger children, so that chronological age is at variance with the child's developmental age. Girls and boys appear to differ in their responses to trauma, with some studies showing higher rates of depression and anxiety amongst girls caught up in 'single event' natural disasters (Lonigan *et al.* 1991; Yule 1992), and boys responding to 'multiple event' stressors such as war with greater anxiety than girls (Milgram & Milgram 1976).

In some instances, higher cognitive abilities and a track record of achievement at school are associated with lesser degrees of trauma for children (Yule & Gold 1993). The presence or absence of adult caregivers for children during trauma and flight is strongly associated with their capacities to adjust. In some instances, when family members have fled together, caregivers act as buffers against adversity (Montgomery 1998, p. 193), and provide continuity of roots. But in situations where the caregivers are themselves

traumatized, children carry a multiple awareness – of needing to represent the adult in the asylum context, of caring for them, and of remaining sensitized to ways in which the caregivers may re-enact their own abuse by becoming passive or aggressive within the new family home (Pynoos *et al.* 1995).

For unaccompanied minors – those who are sent to countries and authorities with whom parents have no direct contact – the effects of leaving are also complex. Christiansen & Foighel (1990) consider that unaccompanied children are packed up and sent, not only with the bundle of fears associated with war and suffering, but also with a series of messages that are paradoxical and difficult to comprehend. For example, in being sent away to safety because they are loved and treasured, they may feel discarded. Or being told that they must move away from a situation of danger, whilst the family remains exposed to it, can leave them preoccupied with worry for the family's well-being, guilt at achieving sanctuary, and not knowing how the family is surviving. They may have been seen within the family as its best, most adaptive members, able to fulfil potentials that the parents were not able to realize for themselves. Becoming the carrier of hope for the family as a delegate in this way may be experienced by them simultaneously as an honour and a punishment. On the other hand, being involved in political activity at home, and being seen by the family as a saboteur and a risk prior to leaving, may mean that they carry a self-image of turbulence or dangerousness into exile. The family funding the flight may result in the children expecting to give the family a return on the investment. An economic subtext to exile is generated which they may try to live up to by carrying all the expectations of the economic migrant, on top of the particular pressures of being an asylum seeker. Finally, they may have been sent away with a promise of reunification, which may remain unfulfilled. They may grow up within a culture so different from their culture of origin that settlement results in a desiccation of roots and connections with their families left behind. In summary, by becoming fragments from distant explosions, unaccompanied minors may silently carry heavy and complex experiences into their new territories, and not know what to do or who to safely turn to in order to feel untangled.

Resilience and the promotion of psychosocial well-being in refugee children

The above aspects of vulnerability are beginning to be reappraised in light of other paradigms within

research with refugee communities that emphasize survival, not just victimhood (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees 1994). One aspect of refugee children's lives that is under-reported in clinical and research literature, in comparison to the emphasis on vulnerability, is their capacity to respond robustly to the stresses that surround them, confirming an increasingly held view that becoming a refugee is a purposeful act of strength and capability (Muecke 1992; Ahern 2000). If they are compared to indigenous children looked after by social services we find that whilst a minority are deeply troubled and need psychiatric intervention, the vast majority are not as psychologically dishevelled as indigenous children who have been harmed by their families (Kohli 2001). Indeed, their willingness to succeed and overcome the challenges of settlement has become an important part of the characteristics welfare professions encounter when they work with them (Richman 1998a). In short, many demonstrate resilience in conducting their day to day lives. In considering the fluidity of the concept of resilience, Gilligan (2001) offers the following version of three important dimensions, initially identified by Fraser *et al.* (1999). Resilience is:

- Overcoming the odds – being successful despite exposure to high risk.
- Sustaining competence under pressure – adapting to high risk.
- Recovering from trauma – adjusting successfully to negative life events.

In accepting the proposition that 'a resilient youngster is one who adapts successfully to risky circumstances' (Gilligan 2001, p. 5), we can enter a territory shared by researchers in social work in the UK and Ireland (Howe 1995; Daniel *et al.* 1999; Cairns 2002) and their counterparts who study the lives of refugees worldwide (Barudy 1990; Apfel & Simon 1996; McCallin 1996; MacMullin & Loughry 2000; Mann 2000). They focus on a practical and meaningful approach that welfare workers can take to capacity building in children in adverse circumstances. For example, Howe (1995) groups together a range of responses under the terms 'understanding', 'support' and 'psychotherapy', that can be used as building blocks to promote psychosocial well-being:

- Understanding from people around the child, including workers, who demonstrate a capacity to be kind, compassionate, steady and reliable.
- Support that is practical, nurturing, status building, clear and informative, companionship, group and community based – that weaves people back into the social fabric of the society and context they live

within. It generates and sustains a sense of belonging. Gilligan's (1999) valuable exposition of the role of mentors who enhance resilience clarifies and specifies the practicalities of such support.

- Psychotherapy within which understanding the self – the *psychological inside* referred to earlier – leads to reformulations of patterns of connection in the inside and outside worlds in a way that makes peace with demons and ghosts, and allows a safer passage into a liveable life.

The emphasis in these responses is in sympathy with the notion of helping people to relocate, pick up and re-weave the lost *narrative threads* referred to by Summerfield (1998), so that knowing where they have been, where they are, and where they need to get to, become part of the broad (re)construction of their lives in contexts that offer them opportunities to thrive. Blackwell & Melzak (2000) make a similar point in reference to refugee children when they say that the following factors help in ameliorating distressing experiences:

- Belonging: feeling they belong to at least one adult who is emotionally attuned to their feelings, to a family, to a community, to a school, to a social group.
- Thinking: being able to think about their experiences in safe relationships with adults and peers.
- Agency: feeling they can make some active choices in their lives that help to shift a sense of helplessness. Apfel & Simon (1996) extend this notion to allowing the child or young person to experience a sense of *learned helpfulness*, by moving on to helping not just themselves, but others in similar circumstances. Sen (1993) confirms that well-being is closely associated with this *ability to do valuable acts or reach valuable states of being*.
- Cultural integration: finding a sense of continuity between the culture of their own country and that of their new one. Being able to mourn aspects of their culture that is now inaccessible (Eisenbruch (1992) refers to a process of *cultural bereavement*), while continuing to explore their own niche within their host culture.

These processes are built upon in other aspects of refugee research by linking psychosocial well-being to material and practical resources and opportunities. For example, refugee children are known for their hunger for education (Rutter & Jones 1998; Williamson 1998), refugee status (Russell 1999), citizenship (Stanley 2001), and a determination to succeed by aiming for high social status and wealth (Armstrong 1988). It is the balance that they generate and are

helped to sustain between the social outside and the psychological inside that creates a sense of comfort, of home, of sanctuary. Belonging somewhere, and to someone, fits with the need to have belongings that symbolize a successful transition from a time of deep vulnerability to a period of relative coherence and calm after the storm.

The complexity of helping

However, a number of complications that unaccompanied young people encounter in their progress towards settlement also need consideration. For example, a wealth of writing within social work and in the therapeutic arena (for example Kareem & Lipsedge 1992; Rashid 1996; Krause 1997) warns workers against rushing like amateur and colonizing anthropologists to a homogenized and static view of culture, because by doing so they risk turning complex experience into artefactual information, and thereby miss the specific meaning of cultural ties to an individual in a particular context in a particular time. There is a danger of replacing the search for meaning in each child's inner and outer worlds (Schofield 1998) with a general label that only illustrates a partial dimension of the complexity surrounding the process of belonging. For example, an unaccompanied young person may well experience integration into the host community alongside disintegration from the community of origin. The pace, focus and pattern of these shifting and fluid affiliations will vary according to individuals' personal choices and their capacities to manage changes that are thrust upon them. The choices may be mediated, for example, by sensing safety in the anonymity of an unfamiliar culture and locality, or they may, conversely, be signalled by re-creating a strong affiliation with others from similar cultural backgrounds. Both similarity and difference may offer dangers and opportunities in relation to belonging, but neither will in itself provide a complete 'one size fits all' guide to the well-being of each individual. Promoting cultural integration as referred to by Blackwell & Melzak (2000) may mean taking account, in a non-colonizing way, of an individual's story and its current re-enactment in the UK context, without reducing the culture of origin, the processes of re-integration, or the powerful impact of the host community into good and bad ciphers added blandly to the delicate, rich and personal equation of settlement.

Similarly, evidence from practitioners indicates that despite the catastrophic psychological consequences of

surviving war, not all unaccompanied minors respond positively to an undiluted version of westernized therapies. There are reports that they may not want or use therapy (Stanley 2001), or need it (Richman 1998b), depending on a number of factors. They may not understand the notion of therapy; they may be busy with the practicalities of life during the initial period of settlement when emotions about separation and loss are controlled in order to manage what is most pressing (Richman 1998b, p. 179); they may not be able to distinguish clearly enough between enquiry and interrogation, and be silent or suspicious of interventions; they may resent their experiences being turned into symptoms and may not be so traumatized as to warrant psychological or psychiatric intervention (Summerfield 1999); they may not be ready to talk, particularly in a context of substantial uncertainty about their asylum status; specialist services may be far away from the locality or local services may be overburdened with indigenous demand; services may not understand them in terms of their heritage and experiences. These clusters of contextual and individuals' reasons may result in the need for psychotherapeutic services that weave into their ordinary experiences in the new context rather than being offered as part of a refined and intensive therapeutic encounter.

Based on his clinical experience, Papadopoulos (2002) makes a significant contribution to the understanding of therapeutic engagement with refugees that allow this weaving process to take place. He recommends *therapeutic care* for refugees, rather than therapy, as a way of promoting psychosocial well-being. He asserts that 'loss of home is the only condition that refugees share, not trauma' (p. 9). This is a complex assertion because home is not just a physical entity, or a geographical location, it is a *sense* of home as a psychological, deeply felt foundation of well-being. Home is a place that connects inner and outer worlds, where habits of the heart are practised and understood by the people who form the home community. It is a flexible and 'protective membrane' (p. 16), which offers containment for good, bad and ugly experiences and feelings. It is the loss of this everyday foundation through forced migration that leaves people temporarily disorientated, as if they were frozen – a type of 'psychological hypothermia' (p. 33) – and they need to thaw out, in order to proceed with ordinary living again. The frozenness itself is seen to have protective functions, not psychopathological ones.

This temporary withdrawal can provide unique vantage points from which to renew and reassess their lives, their past,

present and future; it may also assist them by allowing them to digest the impact of their losses, by creating the respectful stance to mourn the dead, by enabling them to regroup and direct their energy more appropriately. All this activity usually happens in an unnoticed way, if the right conditions and circumstances can contain the disruptive potential of the primary loss of home. In effect, all this imperceptible work could be understood as a reworking of their own lives and community stories. (Papadopoulos 2002, p. 33)

This reappraisal of a type of positive frozen watchfulness allows the sense of agency referred to by Blackwell & Melzak (2000) to be present from the outset. It also offers helpers room for an optimistic shift away from diagnostically based interventions. In elaborating the meaning of *right conditions and circumstances*, welfare workers are invited to resist the temptation to impulsively 'rescue' people from their experiences, because it makes *them* feel better and less frightened to do so. Instead, they are asked to engage with the process of 'therapeutic witnessing', that Blackwell (1997) describes, in reference to psychoanalytic ideas, as having three elements – *holding, containing* – and *bearing witness*. In essence, workers are asked not to become action orientated helpers in the face of 'muck and bullets', but stay still enough to bear the pain of listening to stories of great loss as they emerge at a pace manageable for the refugee. Blackwell's (1997) contention is that containing pain is hard, and some of the muck sticks in an uncomfortable fashion. One way in which workers mishandle this discomfort is to respond by becoming split into sentimentality or suspicion of refugees' experiences, thereby losing a chance of hearing the complex, real and heartfelt stories that people can bring. The position of being a witness – that is being still, unafraid, honest, kind and emotionally robust – is harder than rescuing, but ultimately more productive because it lets refugees name and exorcise their demons and ghosts in the process of self-recovery. Standing still enough to absorb the emotional impact of refugees' experiences is something that allows the movement hidden beneath the frozen state of psychological hypothermia to emerge in a tolerable way at the right time. Therefore the 'dance' referred to by Howe *et al.* (1999) has a paradoxical element in the work with young asylum seekers. Their surface stillness and silence hide movement in their inner worlds. The worker's stillness in the provision of an open space that allows them to remain the agents of their own recovery becomes an important aspect of the processes of re-ordering their lives. The stillness of the dancers is the foundation of movements towards settlement in a new environment.

The capacity to contain, hold and bear witness does not mean that workers have to forego Howe's (1995) recommendation that practical support and understanding matter in the creation of the right conditions and circumstances. Indeed, much of the research into the lives of refugees emphasizes that the practical kindness of strangers acts as a key element of psychosocial well-being (Fozzard & Tembo 1996; Ljubomirovic 1999; MacMullin & Loughry 2000). Williamson (1998), in her research within four London boroughs, describes unaccompanied young people she interviewed as wanting caring adults who kept them safe, who understood the complexity of their experience, and connected them to networks that were meaningful for them, as key aspects of support. In addition, young people wanted opportunities to eat 'home food', or keep up with cultural affiliations, teachers who were strict but fair, and recognized that failing in education would be 'a disaster'. They wanted good legal representation in the asylum process, sympathetic welfare workers, careers advice, to learn about 'the British way of life', and plenty of social activity to keep their minds off their problems. This exposition of these wishes fits neatly with what is known about the repertoire of strategies that can promote resilience for looked after children. For example, Daniel *et al.* (1999) identify six 'domains' within which interventions can be framed – namely, the promotion of a secure base, educational success, friendships that have a positive impact, nurturing talents and interests, promoting 'positive values' including empathy for others, and being and becoming socially competent. These domains, taken together with messages from research into the lives of refugees, lie at the heart of a number of activities that the YAS project has undertaken with unaccompanied minors.

THE YAS PROJECT

Below, examples of the project's work are offered in relation to the individual and group activities. None of the work of the YAS project is specialist in the sense of being relevant only to refugees. However, there are particular twists and turns to the work that illuminate the meaning of 'promoting psychosocial well-being' for this group of young people. The work of the project is divided into two complementary sets of activities – direct work with the young people themselves, and building and supporting formal and informal networks of care – that are aimed at capacity building in inner and outer worlds. The project has been designed so that these activities blend together,

within which single interventions are experienced by the young people as part of a pattern of integrative experiences that cross the domains referred to by Daniel *et al.* (1999).

Recovering from isolation and finding a sense of security

One of the greatest problems for the young people is loneliness and isolation, associated not just with a lack of friendships but also with loss of home, as described by Papadopoulos (2002). When they come into the country, they feel isolated not only from other people, but also, in significant ways, from their origins and past. For example, very few of the young people bring anything with them like a memento or artefact, a photograph or passport that anchors them to the past. They carry very few possessions and are anonymous at the point of arrival, apart from the stories they tell about themselves. They are often looking for 'something to do' or 'someone to play with' in the first few months after arrival. But far away from a familiar home, they can sometimes simply sit and wait to be approached. They can be afraid to reach out in a period of great uncertainty. These common features have led to the YAS project developing strategies for reaching out to them, rather than waiting for them to come to the project's base location. Services offered by YAS have become 'portable', going in to places where the young people are initially placed, to offer low key 'activities' using art and craft materials, and providing food, music and drama workshops. Many of these do not rely on complex communication in English, are part of the recovery of ordinariness, and do not intrude into those parts of the lives of the young asylum seekers that they need to be silent about while they orientate themselves.

The project staff operate a policy of not pursuing the details of the asylum stories with the young people unless they choose themselves to disclose them. This is partly because they may have already been through an arduous process of 'trial by application' with the immigration authorities, where the stories are told as credibly as possible to maximize the chance of success, but also because many are not ready to talk about their possibly traumatic experiences until they have reached a 'safe' stage of settlement. Silence is functional in these instances.

However, workers have held on to the importance of helping the young people to minimize feelings of disconnection between the past, present and future. For example, they aim to find safe ways for them to

talk about their home country or their past life, which do not necessarily involve discussing painful or traumatic experiences. In individual and group work, the young people are often asked simple questions about how aspects of their lives were lived at home. In the case of one young man who had been unable to talk in any detail about his experiences, talking about playing football at home was the catalyst for him to begin to talk in depth about other, more painful experiences before he arrived in this country. A 'casual' enquiry to someone in a hostel about how food was prepared and served back at home elicited a very animated account of how much she enjoyed the way people ate and prepared food together back at home and how much she missed this way of doing things in this country.

Taking art materials and clay to a group of young women produced an unprompted series of handmade reminders of life back at home. From cooking pots and implements to African masks and pictures of their previous homes, all of the group members made or painted something connected to their lives in their country of origin. On a cold, grey February afternoon a young man attending one of the groups, rather surprisingly said '... It reminds me of Africa here!'. This prompted a discussion about the similarities and differences between his country of origin and the UK. It was while the young people were engaged in one of these types of activities that Ami stepped forward to ask for help.

Ami's story

18-year-old Ami arrived from Sierra Leone and referred herself to the YAS project after meeting YAS workers who were running an informal group in her hostel. Ami asked if she would be able to come and see a worker 'in the office' as she wanted someone to talk to.

Ami told her project counsellor that she was pregnant as the result of being raped shortly before leaving Sierra Leone and that she was unsure whether or not to keep the baby. In the first sessions Ami spoke about her fears about motherhood in a new and different culture to the one she was used to. She also spoke about having a child with no extended family network to support her. Following her decision not to keep the baby, Ami continued to meet the counsellor weekly and over 12 sessions she spoke about her traumatic experiences in Sierra Leone, her feelings about living in this country, her family, her desire to return home one day and her hopes for life in this country.

Helping the young people make sense of what happened to them in the past, and providing a secure base

from which they can progress in the present and in the future, is an intricate task. Establishing a rhythm of meetings with Ami, within which the counsellor could bear witness to stories of catastrophic abuse, arose out of a series of 'safe' and ordinary encounters in the hostel, that were brought to the young people with whom she was living.

Overall, a common feature of the project's work is that the young people want to face the present first, the future next and the past last, unless there are compelling reasons to talk about the past if it is intruding into their capacity to live their day to day lives. In Ami's case, the history emerged relatively quickly after arrival, because she was deeply distressed by her pre-flight experiences. While many of the young people keep up with the low key activities, and remain silent about past trauma, remembering their ordinary lives remains an important feature of settlement.

Using capabilities and skills, and promoting talents and interests

The project works on the assumption that the young people have capabilities and skills that they can use to integrate into their new environments, even if they are frightened or bewildered at times. This assumption is based in a reality that consists of working with this group of young people in care who are often experienced as polite, kind and socially skilled. Project staff also recognize the effort that is expended in keeping up a level of civility because they want to belong, and want to succeed so much, that they are on their guard against behaviour that may be seen by the authorities as bad. They sometimes show the type of uneven development referred to by Melzak (1995), bringing strengths and vulnerabilities at variance with their chronological age. While being mindful of their vulnerabilities, and the protective and burdensome carapace of politeness, the YAS project works towards helping them to identify 'islands of competence' (Daniel *et al.* 1999, p. 11) that already exist within themselves, that they can use to fit into their new environments.

The 'Living Here' photography exhibition

With the 'Looked After Children in Education' team from social services, YAS workers ran a photography project culminating in an exhibition to celebrate Refugee Week in June 2001. The exhibition consisted of photographs taken by both asylum seeking and non-asylum seeking children in the care

of the local authority. Young people were given disposable cameras and invited to take photographs illustrating their experiences of 'Living Here'. The brief was intentionally very broad in order to allow people maximum creative freedom. Many photographs were taken. The asylum seeking young people within the group focused on local scenes and local people, perhaps looking at things as if they themselves were tourists in an unfamiliar landscape. The indigenous young people took photographs of the rooms that they lived in and artefacts that belonged to them, generating a personalized sense of ordinariness. They kept the photographs they took. All of the participants reported high degrees of satisfaction from the experience. One young woman said afterwards that she had been so excited to be part of an exhibition that she had told everyone she knew about it. Another said '... do not hesitate to contact me next time you are doing something this important'.

The opportunity of contributing to and leaving a mark within their new contexts appears to be of fundamental importance to the process of settlement. These single event markers have been supplemented with other contributions such as painting a mural for a local hospital wall, and introducing life and colour into diab environments. The theme that has emerged from this type of work is one of allowing them to experience a step beyond survival into a space that validates and recognizes that they have been here, even if one day they have to go back and can no longer see what they achieved.

Learning new skills and connecting with helpful people

A vivid feature of the young people is their commitment to education. They prioritize learning, and link it to worldly success in a way that is substantially different from the impoverished hopes and outcomes associated with a substantial proportion of indigenous children in local authority care going to school (Jackson 1995). They sacrifice other activities, including some on offer by the project, in order to attend school or college. They sustain a singular, linear commitment to learning in such a powerful way that the project has had to consider not only amending its schedule of activities to fit around their educational imperative, but also what purpose and meaning education holds for them. In many ways their will to learn English, and to achieve academically, can be seen as a therapeutic endeavour, that helps them to find some justification for coming so far away from home, as well as providing daily, structured activity as a counterpoint to periods of 'psychological hypothermia'. But the YAS workers also recognize that for some of the young

people, commitment can outrun capability when they are emotionally drained, or intellectually unable to manage the goals that their desire for success has set for them. Part of the project's work has been to work alongside other service providers to run a small 'support group' for trainees on 'preparation for employment' schemes run locally, in order to match their will to succeed with the emotional capability to do so. Particularly at times of substantial uncertainty, a hesitant command of English, and of dealing with ghosts that come and go, the project works alongside the young people in providing practical help to attend the group, a forum for sharing their concerns and achievements, and in listening to their stories of balancing their hopes of success with the rigours and demands of everyday living.

There are other practical ways in which the project has worked to provide some outer world symbols of success, and belonging. As has been noted, the young people come with very little by way of personal possessions and the project staff have run a successful scheme reclaiming and refurbishing bicycles that they can own and use. Old bicycles, unwanted by local businesses and individuals, were collected by project staff and volunteers from the local community, who provided a workshop and expertise in refurbishment, and invited young people to attend. Over time, the young people who participated organized themselves into a Bicycle Club, with membership cards. They have taken part in a Road Safety and Bicycle Competence Scheme, that leads to a certificate of achievement on completion. These small steps in generating belongings have profound meanings for the young people, still struggling with applications for membership of the UK, as illustrated by David's story.

David's story

David (aged 14) was helped to escape from Sierra Leone by an uncle before his parents were killed. His younger sisters escaped before him. He lost touch with an older brother and does not know if he is alive or dead. He was referred to the YAS project because his social worker and foster carer were concerned about the amount of time David spent alone in his bedroom, sometimes going to bed as early as 7pm. When the YAS worker visited David at home, David said he didn't understand why people were concerned about him. He liked his own company. He spoke about difficulties between himself and his foster carers feeling they didn't understand him. The foster carers spoke about feeling at the end of their tether with David, finding his withdrawal from the family and lack of communication impossible to tolerate.

The YAS worker, in conjunction with the social worker, helped David and the foster carers to separate, and for David to settle into a new placement. Attendance at the Bicycle Scheme was offered to David as part of the new settlement process. He travelled by train each week between the scheme and the foster carers' house. He chose to paint his bicycle red, the same colour as his bicycle at home. When his bicycle was finished David continued to go to the project every week and took increased responsibility for welcoming and helping new members of the group. David is now an official helper in the bicycle project. Those running the group have noticed a change in his manner, from being quiet to becoming a 'cheeky' member of the group. David talks occasionally about his home and family in Sierra Leone when working on the bicycles, but has not spoken to anyone in depth about his life.

SUMMARY

Ami and David's individual stories, and the project's work with groups of young people, illustrate and confirm many messages from research in relation to vulnerabilities and resilience for asylum seeking children. Repetitive and intrusive thoughts at times of quiet reflection, sleep disturbance, and poor concentration, worry and guilt all feature as part of everyday existence for many of the young people. Equally, they sometimes experience life as fragile, and are afraid about the future and haunted by their past experiences. Some of the young people weave protective membranes around themselves that have the outward appearance of disconnection and vagueness, or regression, aggression or politeness. At different times, any of these can be seen as signs of being distressed, as well as signals of coping in adversity. In their everyday lives they also appear to rely on a sense of adaptability, a hunger for education, and a capacity and stubborn willingness to succeed despite the odds. Where possible, they use their emotional and intellectual capabilities and a sense of humour to shape the world around them so that it fits as comfortably as it can. Over time they acquire belongings that they look after with care, and relationships that help them sustain the rhythm and flow of interdependence. The project's work in promoting psychosocial well-being amplifies the benefits of making sure that the young people experience a sense of agency as they pick up the threads to their lives and re-establish connections in their worlds. It also confirms the importance of offering practical support that allows them to talk

about home and to own the things they have made or repaired. A sense of ownership and processes of reparation can then have a physical manifestation in their outer worlds, while acting as a balm towards the processes of psychological healing. Activities that keep them busy are helpful, as is a sense of not being intruded on at a time of uncertainty and questioning by immigration authorities. The young people say that they want to get back their sense of living ordinary lives again, with a family, a community, and a regenerated sense of home. The YAS project workers make small and practical contributions to the process of settlement that recognize the balance that the young people need to strike between inner and outer worlds. They need to carry forward a sense of a safe future that begins at a time of receiving notice of Indefinite Leave to Remain within the UK. In the meantime, portability of possessions, of relationships, and of status become markers by which success in the process of integration is measured, and psychosocial well-being aimed for and sometimes achieved.

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Regional Age Assessment Training

Luther King House Brighton Grove Manchester M14 5JP

Day 1 Thursday 11th September 2008

Arrive 9:00 am Refreshments will be available

Start 9:30 am

Introductions, Expectations and Concerns

Age as a Social Construct and Cultural Concept

Age Assessment in Context – current policy and guidance

Age Assessment Format – what do we do now

Discussion on Current Policy and implications for practice

Finish 4:00 pm

Refreshments 10:30 am and 2:30 pm Lunch 12:30 pm

Day 2 Friday 12th September 2008

Arrive 9:00 am Refreshments will be available

Start 9:30 am

Review and Planning for the day

Approaches to Age Assessment – developing strategies to assess age

Age Assessment Case Study – student focussed exercises

Experiences of Age Assessment – sharing ideas and drawing on the experiences of others

Summary, Questions and Evaluation

Finish 3:00 pm

Refreshments 10:30 am Lunch 12:30 pm

25. The social workers approach was an attempt to undermine Dr Birch's report on medical grounds. They question Dr Birch's methodology and her reliance upon particular statistics. However, as A v Croydon makes clear, such an approach is unlawful in the absence of the local authority obtaining and presenting its own medical evidence to substantiate/evidence its position. Social workers are not medical experts. They cannot reject a paediatrician's medical findings in the absence of their own medical expert opinion to that effect.
26. Furthermore, I and O establishes that a defendant authority must have good and sufficient reasons for rejecting an expert report. For the reasons set out above, it is submitted that the social workers reasons do not stand up. In the absence of good reasons and their own medical evidence, the social workers' conclusions as to Dr Birch's report were irrational. Accordingly, their assessment of the Claimant's age was unlawful.
27. In rejecting Dr Birch's report and disputing the Claimant's credibility, the social workers also claimed to rely upon information from the Claimant's accommodation provider. At page 7 of the age assessment the social workers note that Dr Birch's view that the Claimant had poor coping skills "*is not supported by his current accommodation provider. Their observation was that he has had adjusted to life as an adult asylum seeker*" (see also page 9 of the assessment).
28. The Claimant and his solicitors have not been provided with any documentary evidence of this view of the Claimant's accommodation provider. The Claimant has had extremely limited contact with his accommodation provider. The accommodation provider's view was not put to the Claimant in order that he could respond to it. This approach was outwith the Merton principles and was procedurally unfair.
29. The social workers further relied on the fact that the Claimant's voice "*was suggestive of a more mature person than that of a teenage boy*" (page 3). As part of her assessment of the Claimant, Dr Birch considered his voice. Taking this into account, she concluded the Claimant was likely to be his claimed age. The social workers erred in relying upon their assessment of the Claimant's voice in circumstances where a medical expert, who reached a different conclusion as to the Claimant's age, had considered this. The social workers therefore took account of an irrelevant consideration.

Further procedural unfairness, other considerations and lack of reasoning

30. In addition to the manner in which the social workers approached Dr Birch's report, there were a number of other defects in the age assessment.

31. At page 3 of the assessment it is noted that: "*Alan attempted to direct the assessment away from questions that directly examined his understanding of his age.*" This was a matter the social workers thought was clearly adverse to the Claimant's case as to his age. However, they failed to put their finding to him in order that he might comment. This was procedurally unfair. Moreover, the comment is devoid of reasoning. There is no explanation as to why the social workers reached this conclusion. In so far as there was no reasoning for the comment, the social workers' finding was also irrational.

32. At page 9 of the age assessment the social workers note that: "*A full age assessment document was provided prior to this age assessment conducted on 26 02 08 by Croydon Social Services, this assessment has been considered.*" This statement directly contradicts Croydon's letter to the Claimant's solicitors of 15.05.08, which stated that an age assessment report had not been produced. Insofar as such a document exists and was taken into account without the Claimant and his representatives' knowledge of it, this was procedurally unfair.

33. In the conclusion to the age assessment (page 12) the social workers state that: "*Dr Birch did not have the benefit of information from additional sources....*." With the exception of the Claimant's accommodation provider, there is no explanation of who these other "sources" of additional information are. As submitted above, the Defendant's reliance upon the unsubstantiated evidence of the accommodation provider was procedurally unfair. The Defendant's reliance upon further sources of information, sources which the Claimant was unaware of and had no opportunity to comment upon, was also procedurally unfair.

34. For the above reasons, it is submitted that the age assessment, and therefore the Defendant's decision as to the Claimant's age, was flawed.

