

Strong Bonds Fact Sheet:

Working with Young People : **When Contact with Family is Harmful**

Positive connections between young people and their families is an established protective factor that is known to enhance outcomes across a range of health behaviours. There are times however, when contact with some family members is detrimental and harmful for young people, such as when the young person is at risk of, or experiencing, physical, emotional, sexual abuse or neglect perpetrated by family members. Sometimes the risk of abuse is clear, and at other times, the level of risk is difficult to gauge. Protective workers grapple everyday with having to weigh up the importance of connection with family and the level of risk that a young person may be exposed to within their family environment.

The dilemmas

When helping young people build connections with family, youth-oriented workers often have to face dilemmas about whether contact with family members is going to be harmful. Modelling a respectful and safe relationship for young people, helping them feel worthy of care and supporting them to be more discerning in relationships, will help them greatly in their lives. If young people know more about how they should expect to be treated in a relationship, they will be able to make positive choices in their relationships, beyond your time-limited involvement with the young person.

Helping a young person think about and decide whether contact with a family member is likely to be beneficial or harmful, will involve exploring family relationship issues with the young person, and, if your role allows it, with their family members. Remember though, unless protective intervention prevents it, ultimately, it will be the young person's and family members' choice as to whether or not they have contact.

Past abuse

If a young person has experienced abuse from family members, then careful consideration and examination needs to occur before any attempts are made to re-establish contact with the family members involved. If child protection services are currently involved or have previously been involved with the young person, then the protective worker should be contacted for advice and direction.

There are cases where abuse has occurred and family members:

- Fail to acknowledge the abuse
- Fail to feel genuine empathy for the victim
- Have no remorse and rationalize their actions
- Fail to take actions to change their behaviour

In these cases, the young person is likely to still be 'at risk' if they have contact with the family member who has perpetrated the abuse or neglect. Your role is to support the young person to take the necessary steps to ensure their safety and wellbeing and to develop other connections with responsible caring adults who will have the young person's best interests at heart and will be able to provide the healthy support that they need.

Contact with family members may be possible, but only with clear safeguards and conditions, such as with other family members present or with professional supervision or away from the family home. These conditions needed to be worked out in consultation with child protection services or alternatively if the young person is of adult age, then it may be appropriate to consult with a significant adult who has played a caring role in the young person's life and is aware of the young person's family history. In some cases it is simply not appropriate to encourage renewed contact with family members where abuse has occurred, as it may result in further trauma for the young person.

Unable to meet the young person's needs

There are cases where observing some parents behaviour over time it becomes apparent that the young person's interests are a low priority. The parents may be so focused on their own needs that they are unable to see and respond to the important needs of the young person, even when these have been explained to them.

In these cases family counselling may be of assistance. Or in some cases you may need to help the young person to find other support networks to provide the secure emotional base and nurturing that they need for their continued development. Young people need to feel they are special, important and supported by people committed to them over time.

A break is needed

There may be times when family members may need to take a break from each other:

- to reduce the level of stress or conflict in their relationship
- to have an opportunity to try to shift a negative or abusive dynamic
- to give them time to deal with their individual issues before they are ready and able to work on the relationship issues

If this is the case make sure that the young person continues to be cared for by a responsible adult who is aware of the issues that the family is trying to resolve.

In the mean time:

- Individual counselling may be beneficial for the young person and/or other family members.
- Joint or family counselling may be suitable when they are ready to start to improve their relationship at a deeper level.
- If you have the young person's permission you should continue to have contact with other family members to support them and to share information with them (to keep them in the 'loop') until the relationship difficulties are resolved.
- It may be appropriate to support a young person and their family to develop a plan for contact which will enable them to gradually reconnect.

When contact is not possible

When contact with a family member is harmful, and a young person is not able to live with their family, they will experience a range of emotions including anger, frustration, grief and loss. The intensity of these emotions is often witnessed in acts of aggression and violence. Many young people who have experienced extreme abuse at home continue to hold the hope that their family situation will change and that their parents will suddenly be able to provide them with the love and support that they need. Unfortunately in many cases this does not happen and the hurt continues.

A sense of belonging is important to us all. If a young person can no longer live with or have contact with their family, then it is important that they experience a sense of connection and belonging with others outside their biological family. Encouraging a broad network of positive relationships

can enhance the health, well-being and resilience of young people who are not able to have their emotional needs met by family. The young person in this situation needs understanding, counselling and education to begin to deal with the loss and grief that they are experiencing. They need caring adults in their lives who will provide consistent support for extended periods of time.

'It takes a village to raise a child' (An African proverb)



Ideas from this Help Sheet

- If a young person has experienced abuse from family members, then careful consideration and examination needs to occur before any attempts are made to re-establish contact with the family members involved.
- Teach young people about positive relationships and discernment in relationships.
- There may be times when family members may need to take a break from each other.
- When contact with a family member is harmful, and a young person is unable to live with their family, they will experience a range of emotions including anger, frustration, grief and loss.
- Ensure other connections are established with caring, responsible adults that provide a secure base and support system for the young people which will endure beyond your involvement.



Suggested Reading

- Daniel, B., Wassell, S. & Gilligan, R. (1999) Child Development for the Child Care and Protection Worker, Kingsley Publishers, London.
- Brendtro, L., & Shahbazian, M. (2004) Troubled Children and Youth: Turning Problems into Opportunities. Research Press. USA.



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