

# COVID-19, the journey from crisis to opportunity: Experiences of young people in residential child care and their carers

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## **Abstract**

COVID-19 arrived as a crisis. Its impact has been felt across the Globe and will continue to be for many years to come. Financially, emotionally, practically and psychologically – it has changed many views & forced us to think and behave differently in our everyday life. A massive challenge faced residential child care when lockdown was announced. Fear swept through the house, as the reality of our young people experiencing another challenge gripped us. At Nether Johnstone House, we have an ethos built around opportunity, experiences, relationships and most importantly love. In this article, our young people and team share some of our reflections and learnings of lockdown. Time has never seemed more important or significant than it has throughout 2020 and we have grown to appreciate this in its simplest form.

## **Keywords**

COVID-19, residential child care, opportunity, relationships, time, Scotland

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## **Nether Johnstone House in 2020**

2020 – the year the world changed. Throughout history, the world has experienced many catastrophes, disasters and pandemics. We have read and heard about them, even seen the movie! Yet, most of us have never experienced one. Well at least, that is until COVID-19. An out of control virus, spreading like wildfire across the world. More than a million people already have lost their lives to something that cannot physically be seen, yet its destruction towards humanity and life as we know it is all very visible. At Nether Johnstone House (NJH), a residential child care house on the outskirts of Glasgow, we focused on creating opportunities from the changes to our lifestyles. Our core values; Love, Live, Laugh, Learn, Nurture, Joy and Hope, are based upon social pedagogy principles. COVID-19 has given us greater insight into the impact these beliefs and practices have had on the care, support and nurture our young people have experienced and has allowed us to take stock of the value of time, our environment and our shared journeys.

Although, our young people are no strangers to change, COVID-19 brought with it an opportunity for a 'shared experience'. Social pedagogy can be defined simply as '.... the social education of people,' (Charfe and Gardner, 2019, p. 6). Embracing this concept within NJH, allowed for the exploration of creativity, curiosity and purposeful engagement with the young people to help structure and contain their environment throughout the uncertainty of the unfolding pandemic. When we are born, we are immediately connected to people. In social pedagogy this is known as the relational universe. Other human beings make up our relational universe and over time these connections grow and

deepen (Charfe and Gardner, 2019). The young people at NJH have experienced many disruptions to their relationships. Placement moves, allocation of new workers, moving school and the loss and gain of friendships have all impacted on their individual 'relational universes' and subsequently impacts on how they view/experience relationships (thempra.org.uk). COVID-19 by its very nature sought to disrupt this further. With this in mind, everyone at NJH worked hard to ensure that any relational impacts were positive and developmental for all our young people.

To do this, we embraced our experience and knowledge of engagement and participation. Everyone was in this together and this would be the 'motto' to see us through. The common third is a concept of social pedagogy, which focuses on the use of activities to grow and develop relationships between young people and practitioners (Charfe and Gardner, 2019). The use of purposeful activity to create shared experiences helps to enhance communication, understanding and builds upon the development of equal and reciprocal relationships (Bird and Eichsteller, 2011; Smith, 2015).

Ceasing opportunities amongst the chaos of COVID-19 became a speciality at NJH. As a team, we were committed to demonstrating hope and security for our young people. We wanted them to feel safe, loved and hold some agency around what the coming days and weeks would look like. We used our 'newly found time' to identify new skills and challenges that we would like to achieve and set about doing these together. For one young person, the desire to cycle for longer periods of time and covering a greater distance became a personal challenge. The team rallied with him and introduced Dynamic Youth Awards as a way of celebrating this achievement. Together, with the team and other young people in

the house, he set a target and over the course of several weeks built upon his stamina and experience of cycling to help him. For weeks, plans around cycling were top of the agenda within the house and the young person found himself encouraged and supported by people who were not directly part of the activity but who appreciated the value. The day he achieved his target was a huge celebration. There was a great sense of pride from the young person and this was felt throughout the house and even within the wider community of NJH and the residential child care community. Everything about this achievement celebrates the use of the common third and the growth of natural mutual relationships.

## **Daily routines**

Day to day changes within the routine of the house meant that young people were more actively involved in preparing menus, shopping lists and cooking. We created a 'COVID-19 survival list' for our young people to consider what 'things' they may need or want throughout the week. Together, we worked on these and found that the process helped inform our thinking and that of our young people about what 'actually' mattered and why. We were able to rationalise and make sense of the evolving circumstances, learning together about COVID-19 and what it meant for each of the young people, what they needed from the team supporting them & what they themselves could bring to support those around them was an exceptionally powerful journey.

In August 2020, after lockdown restrictions began to ease the young people and team met to reflect on the previous few months, discuss the challenges, opportunities and successes. This was really powerful and left everyone with a

deep sense of pride. The recognition and appreciation that collectively we had not only 'survived lockdown', but everyone had an achievement to celebrate. We made slide shows of the memories, achievements and learning and these helped us reflect on the enormity of the experience. From here, we decided to tell our story. The story of NJH. We had experienced this together and we wanted to share it together. So, we set out some questions to prompt discussion amongst the young people, we used team meetings to gain the thoughts of the team & with a notion of sharing to help others see what worked for us, we decided to co-write this article. Our young people have enjoyed participating in a number of events over the past few years, sharing their experience and learning – in the knowledge that this might reach other young people, or adults choosing to work in residential child care. A legacy to be proud of.

### **A journey of the unknown**

Each young person at NJH embarked on a journey of the unknown that has in turn moulded a perception of their new reality. The young people have all identified the many highs and lows of this experience whilst continuing to reflect on their perpetual development. Their relationships and feeling part of a larger 'community' has allowed our young people to develop coping mechanisms which they now use, confidently in day to day life. COVID-19 has allowed our young people to morally develop. The development of a conscious and the ability to take an ideological stance (Kohlberg, 1984) was a notion that as a team we have witnessed throughout the pandemic.

One young person, 'Natasha', aged 17 when asked about her experiences during COVID-19 spoke about how during difficult times her relationships were

enhanced. Typically, she imagined that due to being able to see family and friends less this could potentially damage or allow relationships to drift. This young person used the experience of COVID-19 to focus on the people who matters in her life and concentrate on the aspects of the relationships that were positive. She told us:

Not everyone in NJH is who I would choose to spend time with, but throughout Covid-19 I have learned something new about each of them and found something that I like in everyone.

As a staff team the relationships with the young people suddenly became even more pure and had a real sense of authenticity. A residential child care worker told us:

The time has allowed me to find more things in common with all of the young people and has allowed me the opportunity to engage in their hobbies.... This has definitely supported the development of a stronger bond and I can see now that the young person seeks guidance and advice from me, on a more regular and general basis.

One reason for this could be that this was a shared experience. COVID-19 was affecting everybody's lives holistically. In this situation workers were on a journey *with* the young people which allowed them to learn and develop together (Garfat and Fulcher, 2011)

This was especially important during the pandemic as we wanted the young people to understand the decision making, which resulted in many of the unprecedented changes within the house. One young person explained that at NJH she wasn't shielded from the reality of the devastation that was occurring across the world but instead she was educated to understand it and act on it to

keep others safe. Each young person was expected to take on a whole sense of responsibility for not only keeping themselves safe but also others. Through speaking with our young people about their experience we can identify that they had a real sense of pride and belonging. One of our young people emphasised how much she values the position she is in whilst residing at NJH. Stating that she felt the levels of support were what got her through many of the difficult times during the pandemic. She told us that the team continued to be emotionally available at all times for our young people and responded when needed.

## **Routines**

Within NJH the impact of COVID-19 saw our 'routines, rhythms and rituals' disrupted. Schools closed, face to face appointments stopped and family visits seemed like a distant memory. One of our young people said that the loss of routine in his life made him feel a sense of panic and he missed the educational environment where he could partake in socialisation out with the house on a day to day basis. It is considered important for children who live in a residential setting to have routines and structure in their day to day lives. These help to restore some coherence to the chaotic circumstances that they have come from (Kornerup, 2009). Routines allow children and young people to have a sense of predictability. However, during the pandemic it was extremely difficult to sustain the routines they had become accustomed to. As we moved through the pandemic and experienced the ever-changing regulations, we were able to re-introduce different routines and structures to the house and our young people. At this point it was very evident that the young people and workers were 'in

tune' with one and other which allowed an acceptance of the pandemic to be formed.

Whilst speaking to one of our young people about the notion of being in 'lockdown and not being able to see anyone out with the house she spoke about how she used this as an opportunity to express herself in a more elaborate way. Acquiring a safe place of belonging for children and young people in residential care where their life experiences have often been disrupted and insecure can often be difficult. 'Sarah', aged 17, told us that she felt her relationships within the house with the team and young people meant that she felt as if she wasn't going to be judged. She noted that throughout the lockdown period she felt safe whilst at NJH.

When I was able to visit the local supermarket supported by staff I was able to see that these changes had affected everyone and the measures taken at NJH had been put in place to keep me and everyone safe.....they felt normal and right.

This is central to a child's development, ensuring that they grow up with a healthy sense of identity, security, and sense of belonging (Jack, 2010). Due to our rural setting this meant that this young person could spend time around all of her favourite animals which kept her occupied and she formed many companionships with various dogs and horses! It even led to the development of a new pet policy designed to support the team to bring their pets safely to the house to spend time with our young people. Animal Magic (Care Inspectorate, 2018) highlights the many benefits of having animals within a care setting. At NJH, we were able to support our young people to understand that different pets have different needs by creating 'pet profiles'. This understanding that each pet

needed different approaches helped our young people in their understanding of their own individual needs and led to greater empathy and connections between them throughout the lockdown period when visiting family and friends was not possible. Garfat and Fulcher (2011) identify love as one of the key characteristics of a child and youth care approach. Although, all our young people were missing family and friends the love and solidarity that exists at NJH was felt by all. Our young people enjoy a cuddle or 10 from workers or occasionally each other. The use of touch is critical to physical, emotional and cognitive development and helps with the ability to manage stress (Steckley, 2011).

On the other hand, the halt of day to day life meant that our young people had more time to focus on themselves and be content with the basics of life. Board games were a firm favourite ironically 'frustration' was always a top choice! Life moved at a slower pace and it gave us all more time to appreciate the small things. All of our young people had many achievements throughout the pandemic, and they continue to do so now. The Diamond Model (Eichsteller and Holthoff, 2012) symbolises that there is a diamond in all of us. It recognises that all human beings have a plethora of skills, knowledge and abilities that are unique to us. The Diamond Model has four key aims which are wellbeing and happiness, holistic learning, relationships and empowerment. These are all used to output positive experiences for the individual.

Nettle (2005) argues that expectations in society nowadays are unrealistically high and a consumer culture drives this ideology that in fact only exists in small numbers of people. Children in care could perhaps be perceived as particularly vulnerable to unrealistic messages of what they think and should expect from

life. However, in this case Nether Johnstone House has witnessed all their young people be extremely resilient to all of the adversities that they were faced with during the pandemic. We saw many negatives be turned into positives for example one of our young people who used to spend a lot of the time at the cinema and shopping chose to focus on his fitness and achieved many fitness goals throughout the time period.

Our young people were continuously searching for updates on the pandemic and were able to share information about how this was affecting different countries across the world. They engaged in a holistic manner and developed a great understanding of the widespread effect of the virus. With this came many learning opportunities such as reading the news daily and allowing them to develop opinions on the many controversies that occurred from this pandemic. Social Pedagogy allows for the child or young person to take ownership of their own view of the universe. Very rarely does it prepare them for being challenged on their perception. COVID-19 has posed many occasions where their perception of reality has been challenged and they have had to adapt this on many occasions.

Young people told us that they enjoyed the added benefit of time to explore some of their beliefs and thoughts about the world and what was happening with the team in an open and informed way. The natural discussions and how they evolved help to shape and enhance relationships which in turn has led to new ways of thinking amongst the team about supporting young people daily and through more significant times. This led to the mutual development of individualised looked after reports and personalised achievement records, and

helped young people feel part of and a level responsibility for their journey through COVID-19.

Containment during COVID-19 has been a key component to ensuring that our young people have felt safe and secure. For a period of time our children were physically contained due to the government restrictions. This was tough.

However, their understanding of this was aided by the continuous education they were receiving from members of the team regarding the COVID-19 outbreak.

Ward (1995) says the needs that children have for both physical and emotional containment. Many of our young people experienced anxieties and times of feeling low during the pandemic. However, due to the inclusive culture that exists at NJH, new coping mechanisms were formed that helped utilise the physical containment in a way that provided emotional containment and we were able to see developments amongst our young people in their ability to manage difficult emotions. One young person noted:

Since coming to NJH I have become so much better at managing my anger. I have a punch bag that I use, and I no longer always feel like I am going to lose control.

Children learn how to respond to situations, how to identify their feelings and emotions by the adults around them (Triesman, 2017). Our role as carers has been one of honesty. We have shared this experience together, acknowledged fear and impact and demonstrated to our young people how to work through this. The result being that our young people feel equipped and knowledgeable, they trust those caring for them to make the best decisions and they are involved in the planning and preparation for whatever may come next. A recent

period of isolation following a positive COVID-19 test within the house saw just how valuable this collaboration had been.

## **Conclusion**

Our journey through Covid-19 is not over. Far from it. We have experienced many challenges along the way but have held strong in our belief that out of every situation there is an opportunity. Learning and growing from each and every experience, reflecting on our decision's together and individually has allowed the young people and team to create new ways of being. New approaches to challenges and a new outlook for the future. Viktor Frankl (2004), talks about man's search for meaning as being the primary motivation for life. The sense of having a purpose to life that is beyond what you are presently living encourages hope and aspiration. COVID-19 is a tragedy of our time. Death, illness, isolation, panic, despair, and a sense of doom linger on as we continue through this time. Yet, despite this there is a hopefulness. A sense of worth, value, importance, and opportunity. COVID-19 has been powerful in reframing our relationships and enhancing our purpose and that of our young people. So as the journey continues, we will endeavour to not forget or minimise the tragic aspects of this virus but to not be defeated by it. Building and developing new opportunities and experiences and being curious about where this journey will take us next.

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Elaine Hamilton is an MPhil (psychology) graduate of the University of Glasgow, Elaine has 15 years' experience working at all levels within the field of residential child care, social work and educational psychology. She is the author of *Life Story Approaches and Relationships within Residential Child Care: A Practice Reflection*. She is service manager at Nether Johnstone House residential child care services, and is currently working on her dissertation on life story work in the residential setting for the MSc (advanced residential child care) at the University of Strathclyde.

Niamh Miller has been a residential child care worker at Nether Johnstone House for 16 months. A fourth-year social work student at Glasgow Caledonian University, she has recently begun preparations for her dissertation on the use of language in residential child care, focussing on the use of 'love' and its impact on the development of an individual. Niamh responded to the Covid-19 pandemic by choosing to work full time to support the young people and her colleagues in the house. Niamh's ambition is to gain a wider experience in social work in order to influence policy making.

Natasha Davidson is a 17 year old girl who has lived at NJH for over 3 years but has lived experience of the care system for 15 years. Natasha is currently looking forward to the future post covid & after a long period of absence from Education is excited to be starting college at the end of the month.

Sarah Allan is a 17 year old girl who has lived at NJH for almost 3 years. Sarah attends Kibble school & took part in their Lockdown fashion show. She is hugely passionate about animals & would love to work with them when she is older.