School exclusions

Learning partnerships outside mainstream education

Jo Frankham, Deon Edwards-Kerr, Neil Humphrey and Lorna Roberts

This report describes how mentors and teachers work with children and young people who have been permanently excluded from school.

Black and dual-heritage children and young people and those living in poverty are three times more likely to be permanently excluded than other groups. This research helps to explain this disparity and how education and other services can work productively with those most directly affected. It describes an approach which impacts positively on hard-to-reach children, young people and parents, taking into account poverty and multiple disadvantage. The approach depends on adults developing caring relationships with children and young people and focusing on social and emotional issues.

The research used case study methods with six students and their families. In addition the researchers carried out interviews and observation in two institutions that support students who have been permanently excluded from school. The report will be of interest to policymakers, local authorities and agencies who work with children and young people.

JOSEPH ROWNTREE FOUNDATION

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Executive summary

Background to the work

The research focused on a small number of children/young people who have been permanently excluded from school, their parents, and mentors and teachers who work with these families. We worked in two institutions – a Key Stage 2 (KS2) Pupil Referral Unit (Sparks) and an organisation in the voluntary sector that works with Key Stage 3 (KS3) and Key Stage 4 (KS4) students (St John's). We were particularly interested in these two institutions as they work with some of the most 'hard to reach' children, young people and parents in the local authority. We also wanted to work with St John's because they support predominantly black and dual-heritage students. These pupils are roughly three times more likely to be excluded than their white peers (DfES, 2006). We developed six case studies of children/young people and their families, and carried out extended observation in the two sites. We also interviewed all key personnel (sometimes several times) at Sparks and St John's, and 19 further parents of current or ex-pupils of Sparks and St John's. The interventions we observed are no 'quick fix'. However, the work helps all parties continue to meet the considerable challenges in their lives and to engage or re-engage with educational, and other, opportunities available to them.

The approach is based on the following beliefs/principles.

1   Caring adults need to engage with children and young people's emotional worlds (including their home circumstances) if change is going to take place.

2   It is in and through relationships with children/young people/parents that practice is worked out; the process depends on these relationships, is dynamic and not reducible to pre-formulated strategies.

3   Personal, social and cultural development will result from, but cannot precede, these foundations.

Staff and staff relationships

The work relies on people who want and have the ability to make relationships with 'hard to reach' children/young people and their parents/carers. Staff are not

frightened to say and show they care. Staff are good listeners and astute observers. They are able to stay calm in circumstances where there is verbal and physical violence. They are also reflexive and interested in human behaviour. This is essential to an approach that relies on learning from the relationships they have with children/young people and their parents, and on being willing to review and renew their approach according to individual needs. This includes talking about their own feelings/experiences and the continuing challenges they face in the work. It requires a staff team who trust and are supportive of one other. This is also essential in a context where staff experience intense emotional demands. The approach also relies on workers taking initiative in order to respond to children/young people/parents and this requires creativity and flexibility. The care that staff show to one another, and the concern and attention workers pay to children/young people and their parents, helps to build an atmosphere that children and young people want to be a part of.

Work with 'hard to reach' parents

It is recognised that parents have many other challenges in their lives, in addition to having a child who has been permanently excluded from school. From the first point of contact this informs a 'no blame' approach to parents. Contact with parents is frequent (with the younger age group, twice daily), informal, friendly and jokey. Feedback focuses on positive aspects of the child/young person's behaviour. This feedback is given, wherever possible, in front of the child/young person. Mentors also tell parents where there have been problems and the action that was taken in response. Parents are invited to regular review meetings and other key events in the school year. Transport is provided to facilitate participation. There is an 'open door' policy; parents are welcome to visit at any time without an invitation and without giving notice. They 'make themselves at home' and are free to participate in whatever is going on. This allows parents to become familiar with the approach of mentors and teachers, and to see the care and attention staff give to their children. Parents are also encouraged to make contact, at any point, by phone.

Responsiveness of staff to parental concerns provides further reassurance and they begin to see mentors and teachers as 'on their side'. This allows parents to feel safe in talking about problems they have and encourages them to let mentors into their homes. Gaining access in this way is itself a considerable achievement. Practical support is provided in relation to their child's behaviour and to wider social and emotional problems, including liaising with other agencies. This work makes it more likely that parents will, in turn, support the work of mentors and teachers such that a consistent approach to problematic behaviour can be established. When problems

occur, parents are also much less likely to regard themselves as 'stuck in the middle' between their child and school, and are less likely to become defensive or aggressive in their responses. The work with parents allows staff new freedoms in the ways they work with children and young people, as parents trust they are working in their child's best interests. This, in turn, allows some relief of pressures at home.

Work with children/young people who have been permanently excluded from school

Over time, work with parents helps children and young people feel they no longer need to defend their parents, or lie to 'cover' for them, or keep secrets about them. This takes some pressure off children/young people. It also allows staff to continue to develop their understandings of the situation at home. Close contact at home and at school helps build an understanding of *who* these children and young people are. Staff set out to build relationships with children and young people such that they also know about *how* they are. Key elements include: showing respect of children and young people's feelings; avoiding attempts at control that make children or young people feel humiliated (e.g. shouting); listening carefully to children and young people's point of view; giving practical help/making constructive suggestions in response to problems with learning or behaviour. In these ways, workers communicate that they want to understand and to help.

Staff work in ways that will lead to children having positive memories and feelings about themselves. These elements help children/young people feel comfortable and relaxed around staff. Staff show enormous patience and persistence; the general ethos is one where they signal they will not 'give up' or 'draw blanks'. They are not shocked or frightened by children/young people's behaviour. Staff work at not taking things personally. They have high expectations but express low disappointment when things don't 'work out'. Mentors, while remaining in control, also work in ways that reduce the distance between themselves and the children/young people. Workers share anecdotes about their lives, show they understand 'street culture' as well as 'school culture', display behaviour they expect from children and young people (for example, in relation to manners), and show themselves as fallible, willing to back down and willing to lose face. They also talk about their own and others' emotions, but never as a plea for good behaviour. The curriculum includes multiple opportunities to debate choices and the consequences of those choices, emotions and values.

These elements build towards a situation where workers matter to the children and young people who attend – they become a 'significant other' in their lives. This attachment means that behaviour can (at least some of the time) be addressed in ways that avoid anger, defensiveness and aggression on the part of the child/young person. The affection and respect children/young people feel for these adults makes it more likely they will listen and respond to the help they are given; they believe these adults are 'on their side' and want the best for them.

With these relationships in place, adults support children/young people in addressing problematic behaviour. Staff help the child/young person see themselves as someone who is experiencing difficulties and is struggling, rather than being a 'bad person'. They help children and young people name and express their feelings and develop understandings about why they feel as they do. They talk about the consequences of their behaviour and alternative ways of behaving. Staff express strong belief in the child or young person's capacity to take coping strategies forward and to use them in ways that will serve them in the future. They discuss and agree appropriate punishments and, over time, children and young people suggest their own punishments. Adults help them set goals in relation to their behaviour. Staff express warmth and affection so that children/young people understand they do not bear grudges and that every day is a 'fresh start'. Parents are informed about all problems and approaches to those problems, and they are invited in to talk about more intractable issues and to agree joint strategies.

'Hard to reach' families are thus supported in ways that are sensitive to their needs and histories. The trust and confidence in staff is evident in the fact that parents/ children and young people maintain contact with staff after they have left. This also reflects ongoing challenges they face and the need for sources of support that they want to access.

Conclusions

This research has implications for a number of different groups in relation to policy and practice in the area of permanent exclusions from school. It describes an approach that impacts positively on very hard to reach children, young people and parents, taking into account poverty and multiple disadvantage. Particular groups, including those living in poverty and black and dual-heritage children/young people, experience disproportionate numbers of permanent exclusions. We believe this research throws light both on why there is this disproportionality in exclusions and on how education and other services can work productively with the children/young people and parents who are most directly affected.

DfES

There is no 'quick fix' available for work with 'hard to reach' children and families. Punitive measures often provoke resistance and further disengagement. The alternative requires long-term investment, which is necessary if all children are to meet *Every Child Matters* (2003) targets.

The work needs to be executed in and through *relationships* between caring adults and children/young people and their parents. This means due attention needs to be paid to the people who carry out this work, as compared to the procedures that might be adopted.

Further research is required in relation to understanding the nature and causes of pupils' disaffection from mainstream school, including issues such as institutional racism.

Local authorities

This research has highlighted the special contribution of mentors and teaching assistants who work with very 'hard to reach' parents and their children. This contribution is not currently reflected in appropriate remuneration.

The study also illustrates the role of non-traditional specialist units that attend to the particular needs of children and young people. Many young people classified NEET (not in education, employment or training), in particular, may need this kind of tailored support.

Local authorities need to take a 'holistic' view on the appointment of staff, which takes into account attributes and qualities not generally acknowledged in job specifications.

Local authorities might consider the value of 'respite' for some children and young people (i.e. a short period away from mainstream school) to attend specialist provision such as we have described here.

Parents and young people should be consulted about the provision on offer after a permanent exclusion.

Our work supports the findings of Wright *et al.* (2005) that local authorities should recognise the specialist contribution of the black voluntary sector in understanding and engaging with black and dual-heritage young people.

Extended schools

The study indicates that, if 'hard to reach' families are to be engaged in extended schools, they will need targeted interventions that take into account their feelings of disaffection from mainstream school.

Further research

We need to understand better the current pressures on teachers in terms of providing social and emotional support to children, and how they might adopt and adapt the approach that has been described in this report.

Given the centrality of work with parents to making progress with disaffected pupils, we recommend further research on the challenges mainstream schools face in working more closely with parents.

Finally, some of the specific and very sensitive causes of disaffection mentioned in this study (e.g. institutional racism) should be explored from the perspectives of both teachers and students.

1 Introduction

This report is based on research with children and young people who have been permanently excluded from school. It also relies heavily on research with adults who work with these children/young people and their families. The families we focus on here have experienced social exclusion[1] in a number of respects and permanent exclusion from school has added to other problems they face (see also Hayden, 1997; Parsons, 1999; Milbourne, 2002b; Macrae *et al.*, 2003). Most of the children and young people we met are part of the new 'ASBO generation' (*Independent*, 2005).[2] This report describes in detail the approach staff use to develop partnerships with parents, children and young people who are typically regarded as very 'hard to reach'. Extracts from case studies and data from other interviews and observations are featured in a series of 'vignettes' (see boxes).

It is difficult to get an accurate picture of the number of children who are permanently excluded from school every year in England. The most recent official figures are for 2002/03 when there were 9,290 permanent exclusions (DfES, 2004). Children and young people who are permanently excluded from school are:

> … much more likely to be from low income households; to have a statement of special educational needs; to be 'looked after' by a local authority; and ... to be classified as of Black Minority Ethnic origin.
> (Save the Children, 2005)

The DfES (2006) report on exclusions of black pupils reports that they are 'three times more likely to be excluded than their White peers, after all other background factors are taken into account'. Most children and young people who are permanently excluded from school are allocated a place in a pupil referral unit (PRU), although some may go to special schools if they have a statement of special educational needs. A smaller number are given places in other schools or colleges, depending on local policy. Young people may also be allocated a place in some form of specialist provision. This provision varies greatly between local authorities.[3] The number of permanent exclusions in the UK fell steadily after 1997 in response to government requirements that mainstream schools develop 'in-house' solutions to behaviour problems. In the past few years this trend has reversed in some areas. The provision we describe in this report is tailored to the needs of the relatively small number of children and young people who continue to be permanently excluded from school, and to those who self-exclude (i.e. do not attend school), most of whom face considerable problems in addition to their exclusion from school. The recent DfES (2006) report on exclusions of black pupils also acknowledges that there may be a considerable number of 'unofficial exclusions':

> … instances where schools use other methods than official exclusion to get pupils off the roll, e.g. persuading parents to remove them from school, or where they simply do not report exclusions.

Our original intention was to ground our case studies of children/young people in two institutional contexts. These two institutions are a PRU for KS2 children (Sparks) and a so-called 'alternative educational provision' for KS3 and KS4 children (St John's).[4] Unfortunately, in the immediate run-up to this research, the local authority withdrew funding from St John's in respect of the provision of daytime classes to young people.[5] Instead of spending time at St John's understanding more about their daytime educational provision, then, we worked intensively with three individuals who had previously attended St John's (and interviewed a series of other ex-pupils and parents). From these accounts it has been possible to describe some of the work that St John's carried out in the past, in respect of both educational provision and work with parents. It is inevitably the case, however, that there is a much fuller account of the institutional context of Sparks, in which the younger age group are supported.

We were particularly interested in working with St John's and Sparks because of previous research[6] in which we had observed particular approaches and outcomes with some of the most challenging children/young people, and their families, in the authority. Sparks works with children as young as seven who have been permanently excluded from school and St John's used to work with some young people who had been classified as NEET (not in education, employment or training), as their placements at pupil referral units had broken down or they were self-excluding. We also wanted to work with St John's because they support predominantly black and dual-heritage students, and we were interested in observing work that could throw light on the disproportionate number of exclusions among this group. The positive outcomes we observed included high levels of attendance,[7] active participation of a high proportion of parents, and very positive evaluations of the support by the children, young people and parents involved. These are considerable achievements given the history and background of those who attend. We wanted to find out more about how these outcomes were achieved.

The focus in this report is on *relationships* – between staff and parents, and between staff and children/young people. Given the importance of the special characteristics and commitments of the people who do this work, we also provide background on staff and how they work together. Many commentators acknowledge the importance of developing close ties with parents in the establishment of positive home–school relations (McNamara *et al.*, 2000; Hanafin and Lynch, 2002; Milbourne, 2005) and how infrequently parents feel genuinely included at school (Higgins and Todd, 1998; Crozier, 1999; Hood, 2001; Lightfoot, 2004). Similarly, research with 'at risk' and

excluded children and young people describes how their relationships with staff are central to helping them 'move on' in the sense of engagement or re-engagement with school (Cooper *et al.*, 2000; Pomeroy, 2000; Blair, 2001; Harris *et al.*, 2006). Our research set out to explore, in detail, what it means to work 'through relationships' and how these relationships are established and develop. These relationships then provide the foundation for the personal, social and cultural development of the children/young people we met.

Background to the work of St John's and Sparks

The work we observed is centrally concerned with values, as they are expressed in action. As many other commentators have described, (e.g. Smith, 1997; East, 1998), we live in an increasingly bureaucratised society where values have been subsumed by the language of 'rights' and 'risk'. Values, as Smith (1997, p. 5) says, 'motivate behaviour because they derive from internally held beliefs, while rights require compliance as formally expressed imperatives'. A values-based approach will not be codified, then, but is observable, over time, in actions, words and the physical environment. It is on a story of these things that we concentrate in this report.

The approach we describe is in contrast to a functionalist or rationalist approach to practice that suggests that practitioners (whoever they are) can apply procedures (to whoever it seems appropriate) with foreseeable outcomes in mind. This is the sort of approach increasingly evident in our education, social care and youth justice systems – reflected in calls to describe 'what works' (Hargreaves, 1996; Muncie, 2001; Munro, 2004). The approach we observed is in direct contrast to this orientation. In this alternative framework, practice is a 'product of inter-individual relationships' not a precursor to them (Hammersley, 2000, p. 19). In other words, practice is developed in response to individual needs and concerns that are identified over time, and take account of previous history and experiences. This approach to practice informs the principles that we saw in action at Sparks and St John's.

1   Caring adults need to engage with children and young people's emotional worlds (including their home circumstances) if change is going to take place.

2   It is in and through relationships with children/young people/parents that practice is worked out; the process depends on these relationships, is dynamic, not reducible to pre-formulated strategies.

3   Personal, social and cultural development will result from, but cannot precede, these foundations.

Staff enact these principles in the belief that children/young people and their parents will make positive choices and changes in their lives with the help of adults with whom they have a relationship of mutual care, affection and respect. The work is 'holistic' (in the sense that it encompasses wider aims than academic educational achievement) and includes broad social aims in respect of children and young people's future engagements with school, family and wider society.

Throughout the report we refer by name to staff (teachers and mentors), parents and pupils and on most occasions we indicate in the text who they are.[8] Lester and Catherine, who are named as mentors in the report, continue to lead the provision at St John's and used to organise the daytime classes there, supported by temporary part-time teachers and other mentors. Pat is the head teacher at Sparks. Sparks also employs two full-time teachers and ten mentors.

2 Working with parents

Introduction

This chapter begins with a summary of parents' views about mainstream school and the exclusion process. Most parents with whom St John's and Sparks work are disillusioned as a consequence of their experiences of mainstream schools. We recognise that these stories reflect parents' views and are not 'neutral' versions of events. They do, however, provide an important part of the backdrop to the work we observed, illustrating the anger and frustration parents feel. In the next two sections, 'Parents' views of mainstream school' and 'Establishing connections with "hard to reach" parents', we describe how St John's and Sparks begin to establish connections with parents and to build the trust required to develop more positive working relationships with them. This is followed by a section called 'Going into parents' worlds'. Both St John's and Sparks believe that, to make progress with children and young people, they need to understand what is going on at home and to provide support in respect of parents' needs. This is only possible if parents will allow staff into 'their world'. This section describes how this is achieved.

In respect of some of the children and young people we worked with, we interviewed head teachers and teachers at the schools from which they had been excluded. They described situations in which they felt they had no choice but to permanently exclude after a period of protracted problems, often including violence against other children and/or adults. Some head teachers described extended contact with parents. In some cases, this contact caused further problems for the school, for example when a father threatened a teacher and a lunchtime assistant. These interviews sometimes contradicted the versions of events that parents gave us. We regard these contradictions as unavoidable in situations where complex events are inevitably edited and simplified in order to be communicated. In addition, these contradictions are likely to reflect the meaning of those events for the parties concerned. We believe they are also indicative of the tensions between the parties involved and reveal something of the challenge associated with parents and schools agreeing a way forward. This underlines the necessity for Sparks and St John's to work in ways that try to avoid such conflicts of interest.

Parents' views of mainstream school

All parents reported that they felt their child had been labelled 'trouble' at mainstream school and could not leave this reputation behind. Sometimes this reputation was connected to other family members. Parents also described how issues seemed to be allowed to 'drift', with promises being made about help that did not seem to materialise. Some parents were already themselves feeling 'out of their depth' in relation to what was going on at home. The attitude seemed to be that they were expected to help the school sort out a problem, without the school understanding all the other problems parents were facing. Being called to school then added to their concerns.

> Tanzin's (ex-pupil at St John's) Mum:
>
> No one could work out what was up with Tanzin. I think she was lost in her own self do you know? She made me ill for a long time – I was very depressed. I couldn't understand it, she's never gone without, she's always been loved, she always got what she wants, still does. That was the reason for her leaving me and going living with her Dad but they always come home to their mothers. But, um, she's been in ... harming herself and things like that.
>
> That's what I'm saying, there are things going on in Tanzin's head and no one seems to give an absolute hoot. She ended up with a tag – all of 14 years of age – Tanzin was actually in that school with a tag. I suppose they didn't like that either. Of course, she can be ... at that time no one wanted to give Tanzin a chance, and I just thought no one's going to help her and she's going to feel like no one's going to help her or no one cares, obviously she's going to take that road, you know, people are negative about her all the time. She's going to take that road, where there's just no going back.

Parents also described being 'kept in the dark' as far as some details of events at school were concerned. Other criticisms included being spoken 'down to' in meetings and feeling their child was 'always being dragged down'. The overwhelming atmosphere of meetings was negative with extended critique of the child and, by implication, of the parent(s). Immediately after an exclusion, parents reported having to wait for appointments and meetings, often with a very difficult child or young person at home, and uncertain of what was going to happen. They also felt the system was stacked against them, reporting that they felt there was little point in appealing against their child's exclusion.

Earl's (pupil at Sparks) Mum felt disarmed, when she went to her son's primary school to talk about a particular incident, to discover a file with a record of many other violent incidents she didn't know about. The school's procedures also seemed to her to be weighted against her son – there were statements from all the other boys presented in the head teacher's report to the governors but nothing from Earl. These boys were implicated in bullying Earl and the fact that they were allowed to stay in school suggested to her they had 'got it in' for Earl.

She concluded that it was best not to contest the exclusion, as he had been:

> … set up to fail. He couldn't seem to lose his reputation and teachers were just waiting for him to kick off, not giving him a chance. Once I'd read the incident report on Earl it would be for a short while and he would be out again.

> I asked the headmaster why he wasn't given a chance, the way they treated me, I'm not a two year old, that I couldn't understand. I punished Earl at home and talked to him about the dangers.

Earl's Mum describes the situation at home, at the time:

> I've had a shit two years, evicted out of our house because of the problems I've had with my other son. Earl's Dad left us, because he's an alcoholic, he didn't want to know about Earl's exclusion. We've been in temporary housing – they put us in homeless families and then we've had this house for two years. They want to move us now to Thornhill now but I'm not taking it.

Most parents attended numerous meetings at school. They also responded to frequent phone calls, requesting they go to school to try to resolve a problem or remove their child. Some parents described how they had to organise their lives around being available during the day because of ongoing problems at school. Feelings of uncertainty about events at school presented a particular challenge as far as parents were concerned. In a situation where they couldn't know the details of what was going on at school, they only had their child's word to go on. As far as parents were concerned, this left them in something of a 'no win' situation or 'stuck in the middle' as one of the parents said. Parents reported feeling they wanted to defend their child, while also being unsure how much fault they should apportion to them.

Some parents reported paying regular visits to school in order to try to resolve issues, although schools did not always welcome these approaches. Parents would sometimes lobby for or defend the child in ways the school did not find appropriate. This could exacerbate the situation for all parties. Pam's (mother of pupil at Sparks) 'manner' during these meetings was regarded as 'going in there all guns blazing' (mentor at Sparks). As far as Pam is concerned, however, she was trying to improve the situation for her daughter who was being badly bullied and never wanted to go to school. Leo's (ex-pupil at St John's) Dad reported that the head teacher at his son's school threatened to get an anti-social behaviour order (ASBO) served on him when he criticised the ways in which his son had been treated.

Joe's (pupil at Sparks) Mum, Sheila, tells one of the researchers about Joe setting fire to Parkside Baths:

> He was messing about, lighting sponges and then accidentally they all went up and the whole building went up. The fire service did say that it was an accident waiting to happen because there were other kids in there drinking and smoking at night. Joe admitted it straight away.

Sheila thinks Joe frightened himself as a consequence of this incident. She thought, at the time, that he was stuck in the building. She had got a call from someone suggesting that was the case. She and Joe's Dad, Paul, drove down in a panic to look for him. By complete accident they took a wrong turn and saw him walking down the road. They picked him up and then sped round to the baths to tell the fire service that he wasn't in the building.

And she describes 'I was so ashamed, I was so embarrassed, but I had to go round there to tell the fire service'. And she cringes as she describes it:

> One of the fire officers said to Joe that, although he had done something very, very wrong, he was proud of him for admitting it.

As a consequence of the incident Joe has a behaviour order:

> We had a big meeting with the community police officer, fire chief, someone from the housing office, and we were threatened with maybe losing the house.

(Continued)

> Pat (head teacher at Sparks) went with them to support them at the meeting. Joe was there and he had to sign something:
>
> > I'm not really sure he understood what was going on or what he signed, although when they asked him he did say something like 'I've not got to mess … I've got to be good'.

In cases where there had been ongoing problems, parents did not always see the wisdom of the strategies that schools tried to adopt. On other occasions, the strategies actually exacerbated problems for the parent, as when Fabian (pupil at Sparks) was sent home from mainstream school every day for lunch (see vignette below). Over time, the conclusion parents drew was that the school did not care about their child and would rather be free of them. Because of this, they lost faith in the school to do the right thing for their child.

> Fabian's Mum, Ann:
>
> > He didn't want to go to school and he'd be 'I'm not going, I'm not going' at the door. And I'd take him home to try again tomorrow cos he wouldn't go in. The next day we'd try again and he would say 'No'. There was also problems when he did go in and he would refuse to go into certain lessons or run out of lessons. There was one person who was an EWO *[education welfare officer]* – she was brilliant. She said 'I'll make sure he doesn't come out'. And she did make sure he didn't come out but now and again she had to phone us to come because he wasn't going to his class.
>
> There were also problems in the playground at lunchtime and Fabian's school decided he had to be removed from school at that time:
>
> > I had him home for 18 months for his dinner. Every day I had to go to school at lunchtime, bring him back, cook his dinner, take him back to school. And he wasn't allowed back into school until playtime had finished and the others were going back to class.
>
> > And I asked when he could start going back inside because he was missing out playing with his mates at dinner time and stuff. When he'd go
>
> *(Continued)*

> back after his lunch, they'd be saying 'Oh we've done this and we've done that' and he was never a part of anything because he was always at home with me.
>
> Whether it was rain, wind, snow, shine, I had to go down and get him and bring him back. And if I was a bit late getting back with him – there were times when he was eating his dinner really slow and saying he didn't want to go back into school after the lunchtime. So he'd get in late, and that's why his attendance looked so bad all that time because he'd be late. I had this letter about his attendance saying like 'Late in the morning, late in the afternoon, late in the morning, late in the afternoon'.

In summary, in multiple ways, relationships between these parents and mainstream schools became increasingly strained and antagonistic. Parents would often express anger about encounters with schools because they were frustrated by what had happened and disenchanted about promises of help. They also described feelings of defeat and frustration in relation to what was going on at home. It was clear that what was going on at school added a great deal of strain and worry to circumstances that were already far from ideal.

As suggested above, these encounters with schools are almost always part of a bigger picture that involves other economic, social and emotional challenges that the parents face. St John's and Sparks operate on the basis that you cannot separate the child from the family and how they are coping. This means that supporting parents is a key to making progress with their children. The account that follows describes how that support is given to parents and how, in turn, Sparks and St John's earn the support of parents.

Establishing connections with 'hard to reach' parents

There are no home–school contracts or formal partnership agreements at Sparks or St John's. Staff begin with the assumption that parents want to see their child make progress. It is also taken as read that parents care about their child and want to do the right thing for them, even if their behaviour could sometimes be interpreted otherwise. From the outset, both institutions state clearly and obviously that their priority is also to 'do the best for the child/young person' and to help them with the challenges they face. This ethos begins from the first point of contact, either on the telephone or face to face. Parents are invited to visit with the child or young person

and, as Sandra (mother of pupil at Sparks) describes, 'we was shown everything'. The tone of the conversation is significant. Tanzin's Dad reported that, from the first point of contact with St John's, Lester (mentor) made clear he could 'see the potential in her'.

Personal contact with parents of Sparks' children is maintained through picking up the child at the start of the day and dropping them off after school. Contact is friendly, informal, jokey. Ideally, parents meet at least one member of staff twice a day, usually the same person in the mornings and afternoons. The mentors at St John's initiated a similar frequency of contact with parents by telephone and through occasional home visits. This contact helps to establish the beginnings of a relationship between staff and parents as parents begin to trust workers' motives and intentions. Mentors also begin to understand the situation at home.

> There were these meetings every month and a half or so, where Carl knew where he was going wrong and we knew where he was going wrong. But we also knew where he was going right and we were not at that meeting to hear 'he has shouted at that person or he hit that person last week', it was also to hear what positive stuff he has done.
> (Anne, mother of ex-pupil of St John's)

Contact between mentors and parents always includes feedback on how the child or young person has got on that day. Workers are particularly careful always to praise the children – having a 'good day' is not taken for granted but is the prompt for the child to be congratulated, ideally in front of the parent(s). Mentors also tell parents when there have been problems. Again, this was most often done in front of the child in the case of Sparks. This could be accompanied by other information such as how the problem had been addressed or how the child had agreed to try to do things differently next time. The emphasis throughout is on 'moving forward', rather than blame or judgement, and making a fresh start the next day. If there were problems during the day, the mentors at St John's would encourage young people to ring their parents so that all parties could talk about the incident close to events. This also helped to minimise the likelihood of the young person 'playing off' mentors against their parents.

This regular and detailed feedback removes the potential for parents to get 'nasty surprises'. Parents also learn that staff are anxious to give a balanced account, beginning with the positives. From the outset, parents are also told that they are welcome to visit St John's or Sparks, at any time, without a formal invitation and

without giving them notice. The open invitation to 'come more often' familiarises the parents with the ways in which Sparks and St John's carry out work with children and young people. This opportunity to spend time 'side by side' allows communication through action, as compared to talk, as parents get to see strategies being used and the actions and reactions of their children in a context other than home. Throughout these visits it is stressed that parents have a key role to play in helping their child move on.

> Here *[St John's]* you can ring the bell, and they let you in – 'oh come in, oh come in'. I don't have to see Tanzin specifically, or ask about Tanzin. I can sit down and just let the kids do what they're doing and you can see it functioning for yourself, they've got nothing to hide, there's nothing wrong. (Tanzin's Dad)

Visits to St John's and Sparks, then, are not predicated on an immediate problem or a formal directive to attend a meeting. Integral to this 'open door' policy is the response parents receive from staff when they come in. Exchanges are warm and humorous and parents are encouraged to 'make themselves at home'. At Sparks they help themselves to a brew and take breaks with the mentors in the yard. Everyone is on first-name terms. It was typical that on one of our visits the head teacher at Sparks (Pat) asked a parent: 'Would you mind looking after this visitor?', neatly reversing the usual roles in school.

In addition to the 'open door' policy and being invited to review meetings (whether there had been problems or not), parents are invited to other key events in the Sparks school year such as the end-of-term 'celebrations'. Invitations to these events are made 'on the doorstep' and might be followed up by a phone call. Transport is also provided, if necessary. The aim is for 100 per cent attendance, as parents' participation is seen as so important to the developing relationship both with them and their children. Parents are welcomed with strong expressions of warmth and appreciation. Adam's Mum, who hasn't been to Sparks for a while, is greeted by Pat (head teacher) when she comes to the celebration:

> … it is brilliant that you could come. Adam will be so pleased to know you're here … shall I bring his tray of work down here for you or would you like to come to the classroom? He will be so pleased to know you've had a look at it – he is doing so well – he is lovely.

During the year we carried out this research, all Sparks' children had at least one parent or carer present at both the Easter and summer celebrations. St John's held similar end-of-term events, which would be preceded by a meeting of a parents' group and a meal cooked by the students.

In addition, parents are encouraged to make contact, at any point, by phone. Rob (father of ex-pupil at St John's):

> Lester *[mentor at St John's]* actually said to us that, if we ever needed him, no matter what time it was, all we had to do was pick up the phone and he'd come.

This expression of commitment is a very strong signal that there are adults who care and will put themselves out to *respond* to problems and issues. The invitation to telephone signals not just the availability of support, then, but the idea that it is reasonable for families to *initiate* contact. Thus the agenda between home and school can shift and is not driven solely by the institution. Of course, the response to such phone calls is also essential to keeping this line of communication open. Once again, the welcome parents receive on the phone and the responsiveness to try to address whatever they raised is crucial to the approach.

With these changing circumstances, staff become increasingly welcome in people's homes. Staff maintain contact, even when parents behave in ways that they do not like. One day Fabian's Dad came in to drop off a bike for him at Sparks. He didn't address his son, even though he was ten yards away. Pat (head teacher at Sparks) is deeply unimpressed by his behaviour but nevertheless suggests Iain (mentor at Sparks) gives him a lift home, as it's pouring with rain. She says to the researcher 'If that's what it takes to go into his world'. Lester (mentor at St John's) would 'go out of his way' in similar fashion, going round to people's homes, talking face to face wherever possible, allowing all parties to have their say in a context where they held some of the power (e.g. in their own front rooms). Other 'small' gestures of care and concern are expressed wherever possible – taking an interest in other children, remembering important dates, following up on concerns that had previously been raised and so on.

This careful attention to developing lines of communication, where all parties know what is going on and feel confident in the care that is being expressed, is reflected in parents' descriptions of meetings with staff even when tensions might be assumed to be running high. Caroline and Rob (parents of ex-pupil Tanzin at St John's) described how the conversations about ongoing problems with Tanzin were handled in a very friendly, even lighthearted, way. This does not mean the issues were not taken seriously, rather that the tone of the discussion was not full of judgement and blame.

Rob described how, in contrast, he felt 'scared to speak' at meetings at Tanzin's old school.

In such an atmosphere, parents use these meetings to raise issues of concern *to them* with staff, including ongoing learning difficulties. The responsiveness to these issues provides further reassurance. In this way, parents and children begin to construct Sparks and St John's as 'on their side'. Parents also greatly appreciated the mediation and liaison work that mentors carried out with other agencies. Parents, knowing that their concerns are being taken seriously, are much more likely to support Sparks and St John's in both the rewards and sanctions that operate and in a more general sense. Lester (mentor at St John's) described how, over time, parents would regard 'attack' as no longer necessary or appropriate if there was a problem with their child.

Saul's (pupil at Sparks) sessions with the CAMHS worker (child and adult mental health services) are not going well. Sometimes Saul will go missing on the days he and his Mum, Brenda, are supposed to attend. When they do go:

> … the first thing Saul will say to the worker is 'When can I leave?' And he'll keep looking at the clock asking if he can leave yet. They'd give him a break and no sooner was he back in there and he'd say 'Can I leave now?' And he'd be out the door like a shot.

Brenda has become weary in this tug of war between Saul and these appointments. She is also embarrassed, either for not turning up or by Saul's behaviour. She doesn't know how to explain what is happening with her son and feels increasingly desperate about the situation. At this stage, the CAMHS worker suggests he is going to stop seeing Saul, implying the situation has been resolved. Brenda knows this doesn't feel right. Saul is no better as far as she is concerned and her unease is confirmed by Sparks, where they are still struggling with Saul's behaviour.

At this point, Brenda pours out her concerns to Kevin (mentor at Sparks) who volunteers to go with her to the next meeting. Kevin is Saul's 'favourite' at Sparks. Kevin:

> It's like me and my shadow ... when we were really struggling with Saul the only thing we could find to calm him down was if I took him out in the van. He would only be happy in whatever he was doing if I could be in the room.

(Continued)

Kevin is able to describe to the worker what is happening with Saul at Sparks and at home, and to work in such a way that Brenda and Saul begin to actively participate in the sessions.

Pat (head teacher at Sparks) at the same time lobbies for an appointment with a psychiatrist, which is subsequently endorsed by the CAMHS team. As Brenda said, 'suddenly it has all come together'. Saul is now on Ritalin (the only child at Sparks who is) and this has helped him change his behaviour.

Brenda:

I wonder where would we be without Sparks – it scares me to think about it. If I'd been on my own and we'd been at an ordinary school and the *[CAMHS]* worker had said that, I wouldn't know what I was arguing with.

This account points to the building of new ties between parents and Sparks and St John's. These new ties are forged in regular, friendly, face-to-face contact, which includes giving detailed information about how children and young people are getting on, and how help and support will continue to be on offer. Criticisms are minimised and staff always try to respond to parents' concerns. Where parents' behaviour is not helping the child, this will be overlooked in favour of building a relationship with the parent, such that dialogue may take place at some future point.

Going into parents' worlds

The sort of contact we have outlined above allows staff to begin to develop knowledge of parents' individual personal and social circumstances. At Sparks, this element of personal knowledge is facilitated through the twice daily home visits and, at St John's, through regular phone contact and occasional home visits. This contact is 'backed up' with regular invitations to meetings about their child and to special events. Appreciation of parents' involvement and interest is expressed strongly, as are warmth and encouragement to continue to make contact.

This frequent and friendly contact allows workers to begin to engage with parents in addressing some of their own problems. These range from helping to get a child out of bed in the morning to liaison with the housing department after an eviction for neighbourhood nuisance. On one of our last visits to Sparks, Ruby (mentor) was at the police station with Neil's Mum who had been beaten up the night before in an

ongoing feud between two families. Later in the day, Ruby went back to see Neil's Mum to check how she was. Ruby also spoke to her about her longer-term plans and whether she should try to move. It is through this sort of responsiveness that parents learn they can rely on St John's and Sparks for support, including in desperate circumstances. The relationship that develops as a consequence encourages parents to initiate contact and ask for help. Where a child is being reintegrated into mainstream school, the relationship between the mentor, parent and child facilitates that process (see vignette below).

Paul is being reintegrated into a mainstream school (Eastfield). There is a strong relationship between Louise (mentor at Sparks) and Paul and Paul's Mum, Julia. This relationship allows particular sorts of dialogue to take place during the 'tricky' process of transition back into mainstream.

At Eastfield one morning one of the researchers is chatting to Louise while they wait for Julia and Paul to arrive. As soon as they do, Julia says to Louise, quite sharply: 'So why has he changed his days then? And why is he not going on this trip? Why didn't you let me know?' Louise says, 'But I did [laughs], I rang you last week to tell you'. It is clear from Julia's response that she realises this is perfectly possible – she has been told but has forgotten. Julia is slightly aggressive in this conversation, as if she's fired up here to have a go at someone. Louise's friendly, jokey responses and Julia's willingness to acknowledge her own possible lapse of memory mean it doesn't develop.

The researcher and Julia go back to Julia's for a chat. When they get to Julia's flat she talks again about why Paul isn't going to school this week on his 'usual days'. Julia is annoyed that Paul is 'being left out'. I was 'ready to kick off there this morning'. She says that the head at Eastfield reminds her of the head teacher at the school from which Paul was excluded. 'Any time they were going on trips, Paul couldn't go, they wouldn't take him.' There is a sense of a conspiracy that she has uncovered 'I knew it was trips, when they said they were changing his days.'

Talking to Louise later more of the background comes out. The school *had* said to her that they 'didn't think Paul was ready to go out with them'. In addition, the trip itself will involve the children performing something and Paul hasn't been at the school for all the rehearsals. This is how Louise explained it to Julia then, on the phone last week, 'it's because Paul hasn't been there for the preparation and so he's not going to be able to join in the performance'.

(Continued)

There is a sense here of how past injustices (as Julia experiences them) play a part in current relationships and the crucial mediating role that Louise plays. Only with her close working relationship with Julia can she play this role. And it is a testament to that relationship that Julia will both voice her complaints and listen to Louise's responses, without going on the defensive and without those interactions jeopardising that relationship.

Parents increasingly 'let workers in' to their lives and to the nature of the problems they face. Staff take a very individualised approach, responding to what they find and working with it. Mentors stress the need to be non-judgemental about what they find if they are going to continue to be 'let in'. They understand the importance of spending time talking to parents about whatever is on their mind, accepting hospitality like tea and coffee, and trying to help parents come up with their own solutions. This is backed up by mentors making practical suggestions appropriate to the family's circumstances. This approach means that staff gain access and respect sometimes where all other agencies have failed. One of the mentors at Sparks describes a relationship between Ruby (mentor) and a parent as 'a freak of nature':

Ruby is the only one who has ever got Carly's Mum to talk to her. *[Carly's Mum says]* some professionals are about as much use as a chocolate fireguard.

Ruby:

Having our own transport means that we get to see your environment, warts and all. You get to see Dad cracking Mum across the mouth first thing in the morning, you know, we get to see pools of vomit on living room floors where there's been a rave up or a bit of a party going on all night. We see the half-smoked joints in the ashtrays, we go to the toilet sometimes in the house and see the needles that they dig up with. We will attempt to say, 'you know what, Ma, I ain't no better than you. I am you, with a badge, that's who I am. But I wanted to change, I wanted my life to become better'.

We've had parents going on counselling courses, we've had them going back to college. When we had Ofsted, we had more parents in here than children. The Ofsted man said to me 'where's the parents Ruby?' And I said 'the parents are down the bottom'. And he said to his

(Continued)

colleagues, he says 'two or three minutes, I won't be long', and he was overwhelmed. There were 30 people talking in that room. And another thing about Sparks – they said they don't judge us, you know. It's building bridges, you know. I turn up with a policeman, I'd never see that kid again – chances are, they'll move. Don't expose me but I can see ... I'm going to a meeting this afternoon and I'll say to the girls, 'just put the can down, don't open it, wait until four o'clock. Allocate your time in the day to have your drink, but you're drinking all day and you're not functioning properly because you're half cut. If you could put that can down you could do this job – you could have a career like me – you could be somebody. But you've got to want to put that can down – you're screaming about this, that and the other and the bloody school and the social services and you're screaming at me, but you will not put that can down.'

I have changed. I have altered my life and my life is so much better. We take our personal stories into the home, not in front of the child, but on a one-to-one. And I'm not going to say to you, 'oh please don't drink, you're killing yourself – oh please don't do this. It's your choice, you are a big grown-up man and big grown-up woman. If you want little one to change you've got to start with you first. If you can change your child will follow naturally. You've got to stop and think, right, I'm going to change, but I've got to start with me.'

One of the things that parents appreciated was mentors' understanding of the challenges they faced at home, including problems with the police, gang-related incidents and other neighbourhood problems. Mentors' willingness to talk about these issues, and not be shocked or judgemental, was crucial to parents sharing concerns that were real to them. Tanzin's (ex-pupil at St John's) family, for example, are struggling not only with her behaviour but also with their older son's criminal activity and, now, recent release from prison. He cannot get a job despite Tanzin's Dad lobbying hard on his behalf. Tanzin has also been in trouble with the police, has a youth offending order and is mixing with the wrong crowd as far as her parents are concerned. She has been involved in a street fight between two gangs, partly to defend her brother, and is seen on the street as part of a notorious local gang. It was in relation to all these issues that Tanzin's Dad would talk to Lester (mentor at St John's) (see below).

Tanzin's Dad:

You've got girls out there, older girls, they could be a role model. They're hooked up into that life out there but for Tanzin it was a constant battle. Trying to keep them people out there happy and basically the teachers *[at mainstream school]* not really understanding.

Even now Tanzin won't go back into that area – she still gets called as part of that gang. Things like being classed as a member of that gang and all that – you can't go into school and say that we're having problems at home and blah, blah. But here we could come in and sit down and tell Lester *[mentor at St John's]* everything about her brother, the trouble we're having you know – he understood.

The non-judgemental attitude of staff, their 'staying power' and consistency result in some parents acknowledging their own behaviour could be part of the problem. This represents a huge achievement where parents no longer feel defensive in relation either to their children or to their own behaviour and respond to the care they feel is on offer. Saul's Mum told us that she'd said to staff at Sparks: 'If you think it's something I'm doing wrong, please tell me, I would rather know'. Tanzin's Dad described how he had basically 'given up' on his daughter:

If you'd heard me talking about Tanzin three, four years ago – ask Lester how many meetings I've walked out from there and say 'You all waste your time' – loads. But they stuck it out, they *[St John's]* have made me eat my words. I was saying to Tanzin 'you're going to prison, you, I know where you're ending up, I can see where you're going'. And she come here and made me eat every single, *every single* prediction I made about her.

At Sparks, the research team also observed other means of working with parents. Parents were invited to be part of a parents' group that offered peer support. These meetings were opportunities for some social time with like-minded adults who were experiencing similar problems. Parents would be offered transport to attend. The atmosphere was friendly, jokey and organised around a particular activity, like cooking. In this context, parents did not feel like, 'everything you do is wrong' (Brenda). This non-judgemental atmosphere is key to the parents attending the group and its success in encouraging them to talk about their lives. This sort of talk allows staff to continue to express their understanding of the difficulties they face. At one meeting, Joe's Mum arrives stressed and frantic. She describes what happened the

night before – her son 'trashing the house, smashing things'. She smacked him, 'it was getting out of hand, I didn't know what to do'. She looks shaken and drained. The head at Sparks (Pat) reassures her: 'it's not surprising that you get like that – we know what he's like'.

At the parents' group at Sparks, Ann (Fabian's Mum) relates a story of Fabian's bike being stolen by an older boy in the neighbourhood. The boy is arrested and his mother retrieves the bike from the person her son has sold it to. She returns the bike to Ann who then drops the charges, as requested. Ann describes a gang controlled by an older man who buys stolen goods from these boys. Ann says that her son sometimes hangs around with this gang.

Corina (Sam's Mum) describes how Luke (another pupil at Sparks) has started visiting Sam at home. She's pleased because Sam is not allowed to play outside after a certain time in the evening. Ruby immediately expresses concern about these visits. She explains that Luke lives miles away. This, of course, means his Mum won't know where he is and he sometimes goes missing. She also cautions Corina – Luke is not the best choice to have around. There has been bullying going on and Luke is the main perpetrator. Luke has been bullying Rohan (another pupil at Sparks) and is friendly with the boys in Sam's street, who are also known to have bullied Rohan. She explains how Luke has visited Rohan at home and punched him 'on Sam's behalf'. Ruby also warns that Luke is known to steal electronic stuff from people's houses, e.g. playstations.

Instead of debating the rights and wrongs of a situation, Pat (head teacher at Sparks) will ask questions like 'how could this be different?' This gives parents an opportunity to come up with their own solutions. Parents give advice to each other and provide moral support. Sometimes they describe what they have seen workers do with their children and the impact this has had. It is clearly reassuring to learn that it isn't only their children who are having difficulties. They will also 'rehearse' strategies they might adopt with their children. Pat describes the importance of parents working out their own strategies in the context of one boy who has made real progress since attending Sparks. In this sort of situation, telling Mum what she might do or modelling behaviour for her is not actually helpful because she already has a 'very wobbly sense of self'; what she needs is help to identify what might work for her and in the process to feel more confident in her own abilities (see vignette below). This underlines why using programmes like 'Webster Stratton'[1] are not always helpful, inasmuch as the programme does not begin with the real needs and concerns of the parent.

> The psychologist this morning was asking me what strategies we used with Mark so that the mother would copy. So I said, 'well we have no real problem now with Mark but what we need to do is have the Mum in more – so we can see Mum and Mark, and Mum can see us and Mark, and we can have a sort of melting pot'.
>
> Some things – instead of saying 'What's going to help is ...' and I don't *know* what's going to help. You have to say to the Mum, 'what suits you?' and to the kid. And I don't think it's that bad, but he'd certainly told her this morning to fuck off and wouldn't get ready. So how do you change that? It's not through a neat little programme. And it's emotional, if you are abused by your child then – like several of our mothers are – you've got a very wobbly sense of self, really, so to have another adult 'RIGHT – stand up to him – RIGHT!' Does that help? I don't think so. It takes a long time.

Parents' group meetings also allow staff to talk to parents about their children's progress at school (and all sorts of other things in their lives) and to continue to familiarise parents with how Sparks works with their children. Staff can see the parents with the children and the children see their parents and the staff *working together*. Children see, as Pat says, that 'staff *like* their parents' and that there is a bond forming between them. In turn, parents see the care and attention staff express towards their children and learn about ideas they might use at home. The impact of this 'partnership' on the children is profound, as Pat describes:

> The children are so *relieved* that there's not a fight between the school and their parents. They no longer have to walk this tightrope, this nightmare of lying, protecting, hiding what is going on.

The bond with parents, in turn, allows Sparks and St John's new freedoms in the ways they work with children and young people, as parents trust that Sparks and St John's are working with the best intentions and in ways that are appropriate to and supportive of their children. In summary, parents no longer feel 'stuck in the middle' between their children and the school, uncertain of who to believe and how to act. Tanzin's Mum:

> I mean, Tanzin used to come home at first saying 'oh Lester *[mentor at St John's]* did so and so' and I say, 'so what did you do?' 'I didn't do anything' ... but I say 'shut up Tanzin because Lester wouldn't do that'. It just flew over my head because I trust Lester, normally I would be storming down there.

This was also true for Lizzie's Mum who realised that her child was 'telling tales' about Sparks that weren't true 'I knew from when Dale was here [Lizzie's elder brother] there was no way that was true'. This trust in the work of St John's and Sparks also allows for some relief of pressures at home. Sonia's (ex-pupil at St John's) Mum, Michelle:

> Because we've never had a chance of relaxation while she was at that school and whatever. We'd be sitting at home – the phone's gonna ring – yeah the phone's going to ring in a minute. Don't worry love, I'll stick around in case the phone rings – one of us has to always be at home just in case, then when she came to St John's I could go back to work.

Sonia's Mum:

When she came here *[St John's]* it was like winning the Lottery – it was like someone was going to help me. Someone was going to understand and not turn their back on her and saying she was not ... Because if Sonia had not come here she might have been wherever now. Sonia came to St John's and come back home to me. They've had their ups and down in here, don't get me wrong ...

I've got a relationship with Catherine and Lester *[mentors at St John's]*, even after Sonia left. When I realise that Sonia was leaving I was crying and having panic attacks, because I thought who was going to help me now, I did, I really did. Because I would still phone Catherine up for a bit of advice or things like that for Sonia, honestly.

Parents' trust and confidence in staff is also evident in the fact that they continue to look for help from Sparks and St John's after their children have left:

> Tanzin took an overdose about three months ago. I found her and took her to the hospital. And I rang Lester and Catherine *[mentors at St John's]* and they were at my door, found out what was going on. Wanted to take her out, make her talk, one-on-one chat. Cos I was beside myself – I didn't know what to do – why she was doing what she's done. Again – Tanzin is not even at that school now but I will phone them, they'd be there, Lester come, Catherine come.

Some parents of ex-pupils at Sparks still attend the parents' group and volunteer for work at the school. Many others are still in touch with the school and willingly attend for events such as an HMI visit (see vignette on p. 17–18). The commitment that staff and parents have to each other is illustrated in this ongoing contact. We believe that the work we observed constitutes a form of 'social pedagogy' that results in the building of a community that can develop sensitive and appropriate responses to the challenging behaviour of children and young people.

3 Staff and staff relationships: making partnerships work

We hope that some of the examples we have already used suggest how the approach of Sparks and St John's can begin to make a difference to children, young people and their families from the first day of contact. There is a danger, however, of suggesting that this ethos is easily established or produces dramatic and swift changes in children or young people's behaviour. This would be to vastly underestimate both the special qualities and commitments of those who carry out this work and the persistence that is required in order to make a difference. We want to continue discussion of the work by describing something of those special qualities and commitments, and elements of the relationships workers have with each other. The placing of this chapter in the middle of the report, between the chapter on parents and that on children/young people, is designed to signal the crucial mediating and connecting role between all parties that is performed by the staff involved.

We were able to get a much fuller picture of staff and staff relationships at Sparks than at St John's, given its change in status, and therefore concentrate here on the former institution.[1] As we described in the introduction to the report, it is the first principle of Sparks and St John's that caring adults need to engage with children and young people's emotional worlds (including their home circumstances) if change is going to take place. Our primary focus in this chapter is on the mentors who work at Sparks, because of the crucial role they play in this emotional work, although it is an unusual feature of Sparks that teachers' and mentors' roles overlap in significant ways – mentors play a significant role in the formal curriculum and teachers play a significant role in the pastoral or 'emotional work'. This reflects the strong belief that there are interconnections between a child's emotional state and their capacity, willingness and enthusiasm to learn. It is also the case that these overlapping roles allow for consistent approaches to the children to be followed through by all parties. Some of what we say here, then, relates to both mentors and teachers and, when this is the case, we use the generic term 'staff' or 'workers'.

We have also described a second principle in the work of Sparks and St John's: it is in and through relationships with children/young people and their parents that practice is 'worked out'. It follows that staff need to be *capable of and eager to* 'make' those relationships with children and their parents. In turn, children and their parents need to develop an emotional attachment to those adults if there is going to be reciprocation in the care that is expressed. This means that *not* just anyone can do

this work and explains why we feel it is necessary here to focus on staff qualities and commitments. It is more than the characteristics of the individuals, however, that is significant here. The ways in which mentors and teachers work are also dependent on a particular relationship within the staff team, so we also focus here on those relationships.

So what are the characteristics of the mentors that Pat (head teacher at Sparks) has employed? Pat describes how it was a 'huge battle to get the people I wanted working here'. Although it was one of Pat's conditions for taking the job that she could appoint who she wanted, the authority had clearly misunderstood what she meant:

> And then it was – where are you going to get them from and what are their qualifications? And, no, you can't have anyone in without going through the proper recruitment and selection. They all had to have a dress code and everybody I wanted to work here refused to wear anything but their jeans.

Who is it then that she wants?

> And I see it so clearly – it's so obvious – it's just second nature to me – it's nothing difficult. All I look for is people who adore kids and the kids adore them – it's not difficult.

On another occasion, she expands:

> They are like the Pied Piper – so that they adore children and children are *magnetised* by them. So the adults love playing and learning – I suppose almost childlike ... or they *can* play. So the adult can play.

Why is it so important, as Pat (head at Sparks) says, that these adults *like the kids*?

> *...* that's a very sad place to be if you're a child or in a family or school where nobody actually wants to be next to you. And I think that these children have that experience in their families and in their old schools because of their behaviour, so that's why I'm very keen to have people who *do* like these children – and accepting – of the extreme ones.

Perhaps liking the kids is made easier because these mentors also understand them and, crucially, understand the emotions that go along with particular experiences:

> That's why I have adults who've had that experience – and haven't got all the answers – but know that it's really distress, desperation, survival, chaos. So the behaviour is coming from that, it's not coming from arrogant and powerful or fearless – that's what you usually hear. It's people who know about that struggle.

As important as 'knowing about that struggle', however, are the values that workers hold about the children and adults they work with. They are interested in people, in relationships, in feelings; they are analytical about how the past might inform the present and understand that a 'troubled' past does not necessarily suggest a particular future. Pat:

> But then they've got to be emotionally literate, so they've been attracted either to the counselling world or to some sort of awareness of emotions and relationships, so they like it – they're good at it – they're sensitive of them ... they've been through things. They're not frightened. Creative or have ... you know ... have a go at things.

Where Pat does think sharing a background is important is that the children 'recognise' the adults who work at Sparks, in the same way the adults 'recognise' the children. Why is this mutual recognition important and what are its effects? We believe that, for the mentors, 'being valued' for who they are and what they do at Sparks has contributed to a particular analysis of their past experiences, which most often includes difficult times at school. That is, despite on the whole having left school without formal qualifications, they now understand themselves to be highly qualified to do sensitive, difficult, demanding (but very rewarding) work. The mentors understand themselves now, in other words, as many things that school told them they were not. It was an unusual element of fieldwork at Sparks to be told by, for example, Iain (mentor at Sparks): 'I am bright, I am clever, I do have a lot of knowledge'. Or by Steve (mentor at Sparks): 'And these kids do like me and they do respect me and so it's not good for them to see me not coping'.

We came to see how these mentors' stories of themselves and their qualities related to their past and to beliefs they hold about the present in relation to the children they work with. In other words, if they can be 'bright and knowledgeable and respected and liked', there is no reason why these kids shouldn't feel the same, as there was no 'good reason' for being labelled a 'failure' themselves. They also described how they sometimes still feel judged by teachers in ways that are similar to the judgements and assumptions that are made about children, young people and their parents. Steve (mentor at Sparks):

> And they judge people like me. That's how I feel when I walk into school, I feel judged straight away. They don't even know me. They don't even know what I do or what I am capable of. The school I go up to for an hour they don't know all the different things to my bow. Has anybody ever come and asked me because I'm not going round and broadcast it. Have you got five minutes to spend and ask about me? I've asked for feedback – I've never got any feedback.

We do not wish to suggest here that there is a deterministic relationship between having a particular background and having the abilities to work with children and their parents at Sparks in a particular way. Instead, we believe that many professionals, whatever their background, could learn a great deal from the *approach* that mentors take at Sparks. It may be the case, however, that, because the mentors at Sparks have a particular background, they find some elements of the approach 'come easier' to them. For example, they face the same sorts of challenges in the neighbourhoods they live in, they understand that 'street culture' is not the same as the culture of schools and so on. Forms of affection, humour and disapproval are also, perhaps, more likely to be shared between people who share a background. We think it is also significant that these mentors expect children and young people to challenge authority and to be disruptive to an extent – in a sense, 'bucking the system' is 'normal' as far as they are concerned. This perhaps means they begin with a different set of expectations and it helps to explain Pat's statement about not being 'frightened' of the kids.

The qualities we have outlined are recognised when an appointment is made and Pat (head at Sparks) continues to recognise and congratulate mentors on those qualities whenever she can. Pat:

> That's what we all want – you want to be recognised for the aspect of you that you value and think 'Ooh, I'm good at that'.

But being valued is about much more than warm words, of course, and this is where elements of who these mentors are and working in and through relationships can begin to 'come together'. As we have outlined, Sparks relies on people who want to and are keen to make relationships with these children – they like them, partly because they are like them, and they believe and know that things could be different for them. In their turn, children and their parents *respond* to the care and respect they are shown and value these relationships. In Pat's terms, mentors become a 'significant other' to the children and their parents. In addition, and central to the endeavour, is that these same people are highly analytical – they reflect on those relationships, making sense of who the children 'are' as they get to know them in

these relationships, and they then use that knowledge to suggest how children might be supported in making changes in their lives.

A further element of this sort of reflexive approach is a willingness on the part of the mentors to try to continue to analyse and understand *themselves*. This means that a relationships-based approach also needs to rely on staff who are happy to talk to each other about their own experiences, emotions, reactions and understandings. It is an approach based on dialogue, not on procedures, as mentors and teachers draw on their special understandings, gained through relationships with parents and children, to inform conversations about how Sparks might most productively work with these kids. Iain (mentor at Sparks):

> It's seeing the kids and noticing things about them and how they're getting on and responding to the small things that you notice if you look carefully.

As relationships with children and parents develop, then, workers also develop individual roles in relation to different parties. And, as the children develop particular attachments to different people, this commitment is used productively to take forward the work with those children. Kevin (mentor at Sparks), for example, described his relationship with Saul. The very close bond between them helped in enacting changes in Saul's life, as Kevin used that attachment to encourage Saul to respond to his suggestions, advice and support.

Crucial to this approach, based as it is on dialogue, are the twice daily meetings between all staff:

> It's the briefing and the evening meeting I think, that's what holds the place together. Because how do I know how to work with you?
> (Pat, head at Sparks)

As she signals here, staff have to *work out* how to work with each of the children, over time:

> We're always changing, renewing, reviewing our approach to the kids, which is why we have the staff meeting. So we're always reminding each other and trying to find things that work I suppose. Trying to find 'ways in'. So it's a constant review. The decision is – will this act help the child move on, that little bit further? And sometimes you don't know. People in the team say 'No that's ridiculous' and Ruby will say, or others will say, 'No, we need to be firmer', or whatever. So it's bandied about ... whether we should, you know, support or discipline.

Decisions are made collectively, as far as possible. This does not mean that everyone has to agree a decision, or that there is a formal 'majority' vote on how to proceed. Informal 'agreements' are arrived at, with Pat often summing up and suggesting how things might be approached. She says:

> It's never clear-cut. Never a policy or a system where you do X and Y happens. Because, if I do it, and you do it, you might be doing it for different reasons and what'll get us to a different place is perhaps doing *different* things. And it might be different *people* doing different things. I remember working, and there would be a distressed child in a school and anybody would go – so one week it would be you, next week it would be someone else and next week ... And I thought, this isn't right. Because you need the relationship to build, for trust, for any change even to start.

Within this context, as events unfold during the day, there will be further updates and discussions as mentors and teachers work together on working out what they might do next. In the meetings, events will be revisited and strategies that have been employed will be considered and reviewed. Incidents that have occurred will be discussed, as will the consequences. In such a context, formal agreements are unnecessary, as everyone realises that approaches will be consistently reviewed and renewed. Conversations about children and their parents, then, don't so much begin as *continue*, as the threads of what is going on are quickly and easily picked up and passed on. Anything unusual, or untoward, or particularly positive is reported to Pat throughout the day. Staff go into Pat's room and, without introductions, give necessary updates or ask questions. Similarly, mentors and teachers go in and out of each other's rooms without formality. In this way workers bring 'community', in the sense of a staff community, to the task of building and strengthening the community of the school.

It is understood that mentors will use their initiative and grasp opportunities, as they see them, to try things out with children that feel right at the time. This also takes the pressure off a formal decision-making process, as mentors know that they are trusted to get on with the work as befits their professional role. This practice, then, also becomes part of the daily review as 'we bring our faults and our experiences, our reflections to the group daily'. This is an essential component, as suggested above, to working through relationships, given their dynamic nature in which new possibilities and problems will inevitably emerge. This means, then, that such a strategy also relies on people being willing to talk about where things haven't gone well, including between the adults. This is carried out in the spirit of how they might learn from what has happened. Pat:

> It's in the open, it's on the table. Let's get it on the table – what is happening with you and this child? What's happening with us? Let's see the jigsaw we've got.

Elaine (teacher):

> And I also think you've got to be honest enough and brave enough to say, 'but I don't know what to do with this child, what do I do next?'

This, of course, echoes the work with parents. The aim is to move to a position where people do not feel defensive about how things are going, but will talk about them in a spirit of trusting that the intention is to help everyone 'move forward'. Pat:

> The whole thing is a learning process for everyone, for me, for the adults and the kids and the families at home – everyone is learning, developing, self-actualising, that's what it is.

As Pat described, however, mentors' knowledge, experience and understanding are not reflected in appropriate remuneration. One reason for this is that existing systems of accreditation do not match what these workers do. As Pat explains, they tend to be seen as 'teaching assistants'. On the bus one morning, Kevin (mentor at Sparks) told one of the researchers:

> That letter from the local authority after Ofsted was in, that was the first piece of formal praise that we've ever got. We all applied for this pay rise and we had to give them loads of paperwork about what we do, this, that and the other. And one of the things that the authority came back with was 'But are the mentors involved in lesson planning and where are their lesson plans?' It was only going to be a little pay rise anyway – that wasn't the point – it was the recognition.

As described in the previous chapter, these mentors work across boundaries – in and out of people's homes (and the sensitive issues in their lives), working in mainstream schools, liaising with other professionals such as educational psychologists, attending closely to the care and education of children. As Pat describes, they 'do a job between education, and crime and disorder or social services, because that's what these are really'. The mentors, then, already embody directives about 'joined-up' working. They are, in that sense, 'supra-professional'.

Despite the low pay, staff expressed regular and real enthusiasm for their work. Kevin (mentor): 'I never have Monday morning syndrome now – there isn't a day

when I don't want to come in here' (three years in post). Steve (mentor): 'I miss it when I don't come in' (five years in post). Iain (mentor): 'What a privilege to think that you might make a difference to someone else's life' (five years in post). This is also evident in the hours they devote to the job after school and at weekends, their willingness to put energy into the maintenance of the building, the care associated with the appearance of the building, the ways in which they respond to unexpected short-term demands and volunteer to do things outside their job remit, and so on. As a consequence, there is little obvious 'management' (in the sense of giving direction or asking people to do things) required, as the mentors understand and are committed to their individual and collective responsibilities. This unusual atmosphere meant that, at the beginning of our research, we were often puzzled by how things had been put into action – as one of the researchers observed: 'There is a structure, there is a definite structure that everyone follows almost like clockwork without Pat saying anything'. This reflects the fact that the ethos of Sparks is 'carried' in the relationships, the practices and the pedagogies that we observed – all of which are paid close and careful attention, as are opportunities for staff development. 'Management', in the formal sense of telling people what they should be doing and how, is thereby unnecessary. Similarly, routines, procedures, formulae, conventions – the stuff of most organisations – are in a kind of constant yet provisional improvisation, as staff respond, review and adapt in ways that allow a relationship both to develop and to direct further interventions.

The enthusiasm and commitment to their work that mentors expressed is, of course, connected to the satisfaction they gain from it. This satisfaction is, in turn, intimately bound up with the opportunities it affords them to draw on and be recognised (within the institution) for the qualities, commitment and skills they have. This is an institution that provides massive intrinsic rewards for those that work there; workers' qualities are praised, their opinions consistently taken seriously, trust is expressed in the autonomy they feel and that is reflected in their day-to-day practice and challenges, and frustrations are debated and seen as opportunities for learning. This, in turn, helps to explain the positive atmosphere and pleasure we experienced when spending time there. It is not just the children, in other words, who want to be there, but the adults too and the *children* know that. This then helps to explain their commitment, in turn, to these adults. It is to the development of this mutual commitment that we now turn.

4 Partnerships with children and young people who have been permanently excluded from school

Introduction

We now describe how staff at Sparks and St John's develop relationships of mutual care, affection and respect with children and young people who have been permanently excluded from school. As we have already described, these relationships are regarded as essential in supporting children and young people to make positive choices and changes in their lives. These choices will, hopefully, include taking advantage of educational opportunities available to them, whether back in mainstream school or elsewhere. This emphasis on emotional work is not an alternative to high-quality educational opportunities that all children and young people are entitled to. It is, however, in the view of Sparks and St John's, an essential component in helping children and young people engage or re-engage with those opportunities and a foundation for future progress.

We begin this chapter by outlining why St John's and Sparks feel they need to take an approach to this work that does *not* mirror school.[1] We go on to describe the different ways in which mentors and teachers establish, build and develop commitments with children and young people. As previously described, we were unable to observe daytime sessions at St John's because the local authority withdrew funding in the lead-up to this study. This account draws more heavily then on our observations at Sparks, although we also use examples from the after-school work we observed at St John's, from a series of drama workshops[2] and from accounts of work they have done in the past.

Not mirroring school

The work with parents that we have described is one of the ways in which Sparks and St John's does not 'mirror' mainstream school. We first want to describe how this approach impacts on the work with children and young people, comprising as it does one crucial element of what it means to engage in their 'emotional worlds'. This work is not, in other words, an optional extra as far as Sparks and St John's are concerned. One of the mentors with the younger age group went so far as to

say that, if they can get 'Mum or Dad on board, the child follows naturally'. A worker at St John's was of the view that the reason they were successful is '*because* of the support of the parents'. As a previous chapter made clear, this parental support is in itself a considerable achievement of Sparks and St John's.

Fabian continues to be a 'challenge' at Sparks. Pat (head at Sparks):

> The relationship is the key thing that I work on and it's not there, not with anyone here. We're now working on the relationship with the mother. Dad is just absent – he's controlling and violent.

Pat makes clear how much more difficult it is with children whose parents they cannot engage:

> With a Mum like that, she can't even help herself, like Fabian's family. For us, it's just like we feel defeated.

Pat describes how she has tried to do some one-to-one work with Fabian's Dad:

> The usual mind map stuff on the white board, making connections with what is happening with Fabian.

Fabian's Dad:

> Takes the pen off me, and begins to write on the board, 'I want him to do his exams, get his 'A' levels', this and that.

She continues to encourage him to have contact with Fabian, even though he doesn't turn up for some meetings:

> Fabian may say he hates his Dad and feels very let down by him but he also adores him.

We discern several very important effects on children and young people of the work that is carried out with parents. First, as discussed above, 'the children are so *relieved* that there's not a fight between the school and their parents' (Pat, head teacher at Sparks). This helps children feel less like they are 'stuck in the middle' between difficult events at school and at home, and tensions between the parties that can further exacerbate problems. In this regard, it is crucial that children and young people see adults who *respect* their parents, spending time with them when there

are not problems, avoiding criticism and blame, and in the process avoiding implicit denigration of them. Although children may be regularly let down by their parents, they usually continue to hold a fierce loyalty towards them.

Over time, work with parents also helps children feel they no longer need to defend their parents, or lie to 'cover' for them, or keep secrets about them. Pat again:

> They no longer have to walk this tightrope, this nightmare of lying, protecting, hiding what is going on.

This takes some pressure off children, as the loyalty we have already described is not threatened when they talk about events at home. In a context where children and young people are often angry and disillusioned, this is unlikely to be achieved simply by presenting an offer to 'listen'. Children and young people have to trust the adults involved, and feel confident that their responses will be predicated on wanting to support them and their parents rather than find fault with them. One of the ways in which children develop this trust is in observing adults' responses to their parents and seeing that they are not shocked or frightened by them. This makes it more likely that children/young people will also want to talk to staff.

In working closely with parents, staff also gain many other insights into the circumstances of the children they work with and their responses to what is going on at home. Children also see that home and school need not be separate worlds. They feel comfortable around adults who also feel comfortable with their parents. Rather than dismiss school as 'alien' because it does not attend to their lives, children and young people are more likely to maintain an open mind about what is on offer.

Sonia (Mum of Lauren – ex-pupil at St John's):

> I think St John's were willing to give her more of a chance than I think the school was because she'd been in trouble. So it was like she's met Lester and Catherine before because she's come to the youth club and they have respect for her and she has respect for them, so if anybody was going to give her a chance I know it was going to be them. I don't care what anybody says, this is a proper school that listens to them, and talks to them, and give them chances and is there to help them, at any time of the day. You don't get that from school. If Lauren hadn't of come to St John's, Lauren would have been – God knows – locked up, because she's not listening to nothing.

(Continued)

Deon (researcher):

It's difficult when you have something like St John's in a community and it gets ...

Sonia:

Snatched away. It's horrible, it's unbelievable. They have so much to offer, I just don't understand. To hell with these children, let them go and do whatever they want to do, that's what they're saying.

A further contrast with many mainstream schools relates to the boundaries around the work these institutions do.[3] For example, work begins before children even start to attend Sparks, through participation at a playscheme that the mentors run in the summer holiday.[4] On some days, mentors take children and their parents out on day trips together. Through these shared activities, the adults begin to get to know the children in an atmosphere that is not characterised by problems. Children who are leaving Sparks are also included in the playscheme, thus extending the 'goodbye' and expressing an ongoing commitment that is not bounded by the school day or the school year. This is similar to the situation at St John's, where some of the young people who went there for classes were already going to the youth club.[5] This greatly facilitated young people's transition into St John's.

Tanzin (ex-pupil at St John's) was sent home early from mainstream school one afternoon when the researcher met her because of an angry violent outburst. 'What was that about?', the researcher asked. Tanzin said: 'Someone made me angry because they're not letting me go on the school trip to Alton Towers'. This decision had been taken on the basis of past problematic behaviour and as a punishment for that behaviour. As far as Tanzin is concerned this is unfair. But then, she says, fatalistically 'I have over two million points' (a system for penalising bad behaviour). What, then, is the purpose of trying harder or in not expressing your frustration if you feel unfairly treated? With that many points against her, she implies, she is not 'going anywhere' anyway.

It is also the case that a legacy of mainstream school, in most cases, is that children and young people feel stigmatised, let down and angry. As a consequence of what has happened they often feel 'trapped' in a particular version of themselves over which they feel powerless. Staff believed that this legacy would not be addressed by

reproducing a system that caused some of the problems these children and young people now face. As Catherine (mentor at St John's) put it, these young people often feel 'cornered' by their reputations; there is nowhere else for them to 'go' as they feel defined by their past. Catherine:

> What are your options when you feel cornered? Give up? But you feel this is unjustified and unfair, so what you do instead is fight.

This, of course, adds to the sense of distance between all parties. The work we describe here sets out to close this distance and encourage children and young people out of 'that corner' in order to engage in different ways with the challenges they face.

Knowing that struggle

When Pat (head teacher at Sparks) talks about staff at Sparks 'knowing the struggle' of children there, she is talking about more than knowledge of a child's background. She is talking about staff *analyses* of children's responses to that background and how important it is for staff to express understanding in relation to those responses. This understanding helps to inform a response to difficult behaviour that is about more than punishment and that begins when adults are able to separate the child from the behaviour. Steve (mentor at Sparks):

> The key for me is when they're showing this behaviour, whatever it is, it's only behaviour. That is not Earl and that is not Gavin.

This is also evident in staff responses to the particular challenges a permanent exclusion brings with it, for example in relation to becoming labelled a 'problem' and feeling trapped within a particular version of yourself. This means it is really important to signal to children and young people, over time, that their responses and the problems they face will be taken seriously and will be responded to constructively.

Lester (mentor at St John's):

But the reality is that you will get a young boy who stayed up all night because his Mum's drunk, his Dad's drunk, or on drugs and he has to look after his younger siblings, that's the facts, that's the reality.

The 12 year old that has just started high school, who has just two hours' sleep because his Mum is spaced out and the Dad has gone on a journey. The reality is that the school will not understand this but will see a child falling asleep and the child is being rude and insolent, because he is falling asleep in class.

We saw this analysis of children's emotional responses being expressed in workers' reactions to children's behaviour, as expressed to other adults, and in their close analysis of children's moods and responses. On hearing that Paul, for example, had been stealing, Louise (mentor at Sparks) said: 'Well, he has absolutely nothing at home'. Iain (mentor at Sparks) said of one of Matt's violent outbursts: 'He is raging about not being able to be with his Mum'. Matt had just been taken into local authority care because his Mum neglects him. At the same time, Matt is desperate to spend more time with her and pleads for extra contact. On another occasion we saw Louise speculate about why Luke was so quiet. Louise's first response to the other adults was 'I think something's happened. I think he's depressed.' Luke has lost two members of his family in shootings. This is the sort of observation that is raised in after-school meetings. Steve (mentor at Sparks): 'And that's the stuff we talk about daily and make sure we get up close and make sure we all know the important things like that'.

Pat:

It's people not *understanding* what they've had to put up with before they come to school. That their emotional state prevents learning. So a little boy came today and he's looking at a picture and he's saying, 'is that, is that ...?' And you can see – he's been homeless, he's been with violence and with alcohol and it doesn't really quite make sense still. And he's not being stupid ... it's just that he's been living on people's floors for the last six months and he doesn't quite know how to think and deal with it.

(Continued)

> I remember a psychologist came in and said 'Do you know I've just been in a school and there's been a violent outburst with this eight year old and, when the teacher asked the child what was the matter, the child said, 'well, the way he looked at me!' And the psychologist was saying 'isn't it ridiculous a child responding like that' – and that just ... it distresses me that there's such a lack of insight by some professionals.
>
> A little boy who's just come this week can't *bear* anyone looking at him and on his first day actually managed to ask, to say, 'will you take me into class before anybody's there and make me sit where nobody can see me'. Because just a look means you're a thick load of shit. You can't write, you can't read and then his defences are up and then he's attacking. But it's a look – that's all it takes – to mirror to the child his lack of self-worth and lack of self-esteem. But most adults don't get it.

Workers also recognise that children and young people have, in some ways, an 'upside down' experience of life where they dread going home after school rather than look forward to it. Lester (mentor at St John's): 'What they're going home to is so bad that it's very hard to take'. Kevin (mentor at Sparks) described how:

> … you can see them putting up those barriers again that they allowed down in the morning – they don't know what they will find when they get home and the last nice thing of the day is the ride on the bus home.

Weekends could also be a low point in the week for some children and young people:

> Monday is often reprogramming day where we've got to, you know, they've had two days running wild and no one gives a toss about you. (Ruby)

> Tanzin's (ex-pupil at St John's) aunt said in angry, tired despair to one of the researchers after Tanzin hadn't come home the night before: 'I don't know what else I can do. Nothing seems to work – I've had enough.' She had told Tanzin that morning that she had to return to her Mum's, 'pack your bag and go back'. But Tanzin is reported as not wanting to go home 'and her mother doesn't want her home' either.

In addition, workers understand that children and young people usually feel powerless to do anything about what is going on. Steve (mentor at Sparks):

> Toby knows a lot more than what he should know. Toby's an old man in a young man's body. He's grown up far too quickly. He's had to. He's not had a choice in that. What is he going through daily, and he doesn't want to.

As reported by Marco's (ex-pupil at St John's) Mum:

Marco used to always say Lester *[mentor at St John's]* was fair. And I think also as well, it did not finish when school was finished. If Lester thought there was a problem with Marco, he would come round to the house. And he would talk to Marco on a one to one and say 'This is your house and you can shout and say what you want. This is your building, like school is my building, this is your building, and if you want to air any views now while you are in your building, say what you want to say cause I can't tell you to shut up cause this is your house.' And I think that is what helped him because he knew it wasn't just, the kids knew that they could be heard and be listened to. He said everyone had their own and say their say, and he wouldn't judge until they had their say.

With the older age group, Lester (mentor at St John's) described other resentments young people brought with them from mainstream school. As many other commentators have described (Wright *et al.*, 2000; Blair, 2001; John, 2006), black young people often regard racism as the explanation for their exclusion. When, in turn, their perspective on this issue is ignored, this adds to their sense of injustice and to their perceptions of racism. Attempts at challenging a teacher's version of events can compound problems for black teenagers, as their 'reputation' as confrontational may be confirmed in the process (Youdell, 2003; Howarth, 2004). It is important, then, that these resentments become an important part of the informal curriculum and Lester (mentor at St John's) described how he would debate with young people their perceptions of racism, taking very seriously their experiences and challenging them on possible alternative explanations and their own part in their exclusion. This is parallel to work described by Wright *et al.* (2005) who describe how black-led organisations play an essential role in respect of addressing young people's experiences of institutional racism. A further contribution of such organisations is in giving young people an opportunity to test out, draw and redraw different versions of themselves in contrast to an 'oppositional' identity that they can feel trapped within (Howarth, 2004).

One of the researchers asks Lee (ex-student at St John's) if she can talk to his old school:

> No – they're just going to tell you I'm a terrorist, that I terrorised them, anyway talk to me, anything you want to know, talk to me.

Later in the research, Lee expressed concern about his reputation following him to college. He'd left some details off his application form and they want to know why he was excluded:

> Not even my school now wanted to know that, that's like two years ago, it's in my past and two years later they want to know.

Catherine (mentor at St John's) followed this up on his behalf by talking at length to college on the phone and writing a reference. Lee also comes to St John's most days after school. He uses the computers there and gets help with his homework and constant encouragement and monitoring from the mentors. Lee says of St John's:

> It keeps me off the street. Lester has told me that whenever I'm out of school, I'm to come to St John's and stay off the streets.

As we have suggested, many difficult patterns of behaviour have become established by the time of a permanent exclusion, and many children and young people also feel quite cynical about teachers (and others) who claim to want to 'help'. This underlines the need for adults to 'follow through' on their commitments and display the understanding we outline here *over time*. Mentors at St John's understand the stigma associated with exclusion and how the fact of an exclusion can add to other problems a young person faces. This makes vouching for good behaviour, providing references and mediating on behalf of young people particularly important.

Catch them being good

Multiple problems at home and at school contribute to children and young people's negative self-evaluations. In many cases they are told, directly or indirectly, at school and often at home, 'that they are just shit' (Louise, mentor at Sparks). The younger age group would sometimes express these feelings quite directly, telling the researchers things like 'I'm rubbish' (Lizzie). Lizzie has also self-harmed. Lloyd

(mentor at Sparks): 'You just have to hear the words some of the kids who are struggling – I'm stupid, I'm this, I'm that'. Louise: 'I'm ugly, I'm useless'. Workers recognise that some of the kids are so 'low' that they 'can't take a positive whatsoever no matter how hard you try and that's because their self-esteem is rock, rock bottom' (Louise). As we have described, exclusion from school reinforces negative self-perceptions. Steve (mentor at Sparks):

> When us as adults are always going on about don't judge people for their colour, don't judge people for their creed, but we judge kids. An eight, nine year old that's expelled from a primary school – what a horrible thing to do to a child.

Ruby (mentor at Sparks):

I think mud sticks is the answer – I think once you've got a label as the bad boy and then the other parents come into the school and they say – they put a lot of pressure on the school – 'what are you going to do about Johnny? My child can't learn because Johnny's in his classroom. My child's frightened. My child's started to wet the bed because my child is terrified.' So there's a lot – it's not just the school that rejects him, it's the bloody whole lot. Parents at the school gate, you know. Who picks Johnny up? Who gives a toss who gets Johnny into school for nine o'clock? Johnny is on his own, Johnny's life's so lost. Johnny needs to come here and be loved and valued and given a sense of worth, and we need to find out what Johnny's good at and not focusing on what he's bad at. We've got to scrape him up off the floor and we've got to show him that he's beautiful and special and very, very important. This is a place to belong when they've never belonged anywhere, but they belong here.

We have already described how parents receive regular and positive reports about children and young people's behaviour. Wherever possible, these reports were delivered in front of children and young people. In addition to hearing these reports, children's daily experience at Sparks is one where they are helped to 'rewrite' a version of themselves into someone who is good at things and is liked. Ruby (mentor at Sparks) described how they set out to 'catch them being good'. This is an interesting inversion of the word 'catch' as it is usually employed in relation to misdemeanours. In contrast, staff actively and consistently look out for things they can congratulate the children on and communicate pleasure strongly in response. We saw the same attitude among staff at St John's where they used opportunities to

turn 'everyday' interactions into praise. When talking about his brother, Lee turned to Catherine (mentor at St John's) and said: 'Is it true my brother is hard, but he's gone good because it's his third year [at university]?'. Catherine: 'Yeah and you're trying to be like him'.

The bus ride is usually the first contact between children and staff at Sparks, and Ruby and Kevin (mentors at Sparks) make the journeys pleasurable – teasing in an affectionate way, joking, chatting and playing loud music. The bus is also an important location for 'serious' work to go on, but in a very informal and unthreatening context. On many occasions we observed mentors talking to children on the bus, very informally, about serious incidents that had happened earlier in the day. Typically, such conversations would begin with a question like 'So what was that about, then?' The advantage of having these sorts of conversations on the bus is that the context adds to the informality of the exchange, which means the behaviour itself (although sometimes extreme) is not responded to as if it was extreme. A calm measured response on the part of the adults makes it more likely that the child will try to explain what was going on, also in a way that avoids defensive responses and anger.

> Francis (Earl's Mum):
>
> There has been a big turnaround in the last three weeks. Earl *[pupil at Sparks]* is making sense of his life, taking account of what he's doing. The family, everybody has noticed a change in him, they've done wonders with him, he needed the proper support. I can't knock it, they treat the kids with so much respect and the kids give it back. He earned days by his behaviour. He started on two days, they say he's one of the fastest kids to earn a place in a short space of time. He interacts well with the other kids, from the day he came he's been getting lots of praise.

Children also get a very warm welcome to Sparks every day and this helps them feel liked. The staff show them that they are *actively* pleased to see them through warm greetings, smiles, bits of informal chat and 'in jokes'. Staff work hard not to 'carry over' difficult events or emotions from previous encounters and set out to show the children there are 'no hard feelings'. The children have nicknames and mentors use them affectionately. The atmosphere in the building when they arrive is also calm and warm, and the children see the adults getting on well with each other (chatting, having a laugh and so on). As Greg (teacher at Sparks) said, this is an atmosphere and a set of relationships that 'the kids want to be a part of'. This is an important step

in encouraging children's participation in both formal activities and in building the relationships through which staff work. It is important that the children *want* to come to school and *want* to join in activities.

> On the bus on the way home, Lloyd (mentor at Sparks) calls Lizzie 'Fudge' and I ask if they've all got nicknames. Lloyd tells me: 'Lee-ham, Fudge-cake, Crystal-tips, Kit-kat ...' 'Where does Fudge come from?', I ask. 'A story about a girl with red hair who liked fudge, wasn't it?'
>
> This sets Lloyd off into imitating each of the children in turn and they have to guess who he's impersonating. Lloyd overacts, 'snapping' at something and the children laugh. Lloyd says 'Well that's Dean's problem isn't it, he can't take correction'. Lizzie: 'I'm like that'. Lloyd considers 'Mmm, yes, that's true, but not always, whereas your problem is ...'
>
> The topic is a serious one, taken seriously by the kids and the adults, despite the jokey introduction. Lloyd asks Luke:
>
>> So what was up with you earlier when someone called you Duke? I called you that name last week and you were all right.

In terms of a formal rewards system, the staff at Sparks use 'gold slips' and these are given out when children, for example, stay on task, put their hands up to answer questions, ask politely to borrow equipment and so on. Gold slips are also used, however, in less obvious ways. Earl (pupil at Sparks) arrived late one day, having been to the dentist. Ruby (mentor) came over with a gold slip: 'Lovely to see you'. Another day I asked who I could sit next to in a class and Saul, who volunteered, got a gold slip 'For being kind'. A parent of an ex-pupil at St John's told us how a more formal reward system was also used there. Caroline:

> And I like the way they used to praise the kids at the end of the week, when they used to go on day trips if they was good for the week. They would take them out on the last day. Sometimes I wish I was coming here – I might have got an education myself.

Positive memories

We have already touched on the calm and warm atmosphere of Sparks, and we suggested it is important that children and young people *want* to come to school and *want* to be a part of the 'community' of school. Other research has described how disadvantaged children often associate mainstream school with coercion and control (Sutton *et al.*, 2007, forthcoming). Disadvantaged children also report feeling that they are not respected by teachers and resent the forms of punishment that are meted out. 'Going missing' from school, is, in part, a response to these feelings, whether in the form of skipping lessons, playing truant, misbehaving or just 'switching off' (Horgan, 2007, forthcoming). Another study (Wikeley *et al.*, 2007, forthcoming) has described the importance to children of the voluntary nature of adult involvement in after-school activities. In such contexts, children feel the adults are there to do things *with them* (rather than *to them*) and in the process are more likely, themselves, to become active participants. Staff at Sparks and St John's set out to build the same sense of emotional connectedness through pleasurable joint activities.

It's the end-of-term celebration and everyone is in the hall. Parents, social workers, people from the local authority have been arriving over the previous half hour and listening to the children on the steel pans in the playground.

Formal events begin with a slide show of a trip to the local Sikh temple. The kids and parents look out for photos of themselves, point and talk about what happened. Greg (teacher at Sparks) provides a running commentary and asks questions about what the kids remember:

We were really lucky because he wouldn't normally take his turban off in front of us and show us how he puts it on …

Here's Luke at the lunch *[Luke now wearing turban]*.

Everyone laughs.

Then there's a quiz. People work in family teams but there's lots of 'cheating' throughout, as kids bob back and forth and check answers with each other. They are allowed a very free rein and mentors also 'misbehave', making jokes about who knows the right answer and who knows the story of Jack and the Beanstalk

(Continued)

better – 'Well I've got the film and I know'. The parents appreciate Iain's (mentor at Sparks) willingness to 'act up'. More laughing throughout.

Music next and the kids sing something they've been practising for a while and do a conga in the middle of the hall. We are encouraged to clap along. One of the mentors signals that we should also join in the dancing and most of us form another conga in a circle round the kids, moving in the opposite direction. The kids are having a good time, their parents are aware of other adults enjoying their kids, congratulating them, praising them, and all that contributes to the good time they are having. I have never seen so much smiling in one room in a school before.

Steve (mentor at Sparks) goes forward to give out certificates. The atmosphere becomes very sober. Steve tells us about the children's different achievements and calls them up one by one. He congratulates each child with a handshake and a few words quietly in the child's ear. Particularly notable achievements are marked by Iain and Floyd (mentors at Sparks) who stand to clap. Iain (mentor) gives out other medals for sporting achievements. He either rubs the back of the child's head, or pats them on the back, or in one case strokes their face. All the while he looks like the 'proud parent', beaming at the kids, telling them how great they are. Two boys missed getting the football medal but Iain describes how hard they tried and initiates a 'foot roll' for them as an alternative to another round of applause.

Activities are a very important part of the formal and informal curriculum, with visits out, a residential once a year[6] and children taken to after-school clubs, for swimming lessons, to football practice and so on. When funds can be raised, mentors will also take children out at weekends.[7] Events like the end-of-term 'celebrations' are also organised around much more than certificates and prizes (see vignette above), and are also opportunities for laying down positive memories as children, parents and workers get to *feel good* too. During lesson time, activities are designed so that children can achieve small steps, with help if necessary, and come to see themselves as someone who can achieve and do well. As Elaine (teacher at Sparks) said:

> It is all very well saying we must do the National Curriculum and we do, but you also have to recognise that the kids here are not in a place where they are able to receive it. There is no point trying to feed a child who is not hungry with huge meals and then serving it up again the next time when they haven't eaten it. This is a situation which is bound to fail. What

you need is flexibility so that you can adapt according to what happens and their responses. In that way they get to achieve things they are pleased with and develop confidence in what they can do.

One of the many important academic achievements that Sparks and St John's facilitates is helping children and young people learn to read.[8]

It could be argued that fun activities give children and young people who have been excluded from school unrealistic expectations of school. However, our research indicated that these activities are an essential component to helping children and young people change their behaviour. First, in a context where many of the children and young people who are excluded from school lead what one mentor called 'totally manic, stressed-out lives', having a 'good time' is not something to be taken for granted. Pleasurable activities in such a context *are* a form of escape, but not in the negative sense, where it is suggested children and young people are failed because 'this is not "real life"'. In a sense, these activities are actually an escape *to* a different sort of 'real life' where children and young people learn, through pleasure, that life can be associated with things other than problems.

Activities like residentials are also *shared* activities during which adults and children/young people do things 'side by side'. In the context of Sparks, we also observed how having good times together allowed the children and adults to *reminisce* together. This, in turn, engenders further positive emotions as children and adults talk and laugh about what happened.

In addition, activities and trips out are further opportunities when children might be 'caught' being good. In other institutions, it is often these 'privileges', of course, that are withdrawn from children who have behavioural problems. The importance of these activities to the children helps to explain staff reluctance to withdraw such activities, however difficult a child's behaviour is.

Children reciprocate the affection and warmth they are shown. One day the PATHS (Program for Alternative Thinking Strategies) session is about teasing and how teasing can lead to bullying. After reading a story, the teacher intends to get the children talking about experiences of teasing/bullying they have had. However, the children have other ideas, beginning with stories about how Iain and Kevin (mentors at Sparks) tease them. These stories are all told with obvious pleasure and much laughter; the children enjoy the teasing and now they are enjoying telling the stories of the teasing. The adults join in the laughter. Children then start teasing Kevin in a knowing parody of what they've just been talking about. They suggest his mobile phone is ringing and that he must be deaf if he can't hear it. Kevin plays along, playing dumb and causing more laughter.

During evening sessions at St John's we observed warm and affectionate exchanges with young people who joined in family activities, such as cooking.

One evening after an interview, Lee (ex-pupil at St John's) and Deon (researcher) went to the kitchen where Joshua (volunteer worker at St John's) was preparing chicken for people expected later. Lee started opening cupboards looking for food – his Mum was away and he was expecting a girl for the weekend. 'What can I do? I've got potato chips, I need something else.' When Catherine (mentor at St John's) joins them he begs her for some of the chicken – they banter back and forth about how many pieces he should be allowed, eventually agreeing on four that Catherine wraps in cellophane.

Catherine suggests she should get something in return; will Lee come on Sunday to the meeting they are holding? He promises he will, but she knows there's little chance. 'Like the last time you turned up just when we were serving lunch! You only came for the food', she laughs. Lee enjoys the teasing and laughs along.

It is this sort of scenario that puts Pat's (headteacher at Sparks) comment about appointing staff who like 'playing and learning' into context. The adults are happy – they like these kids and enjoy their company – and they enjoy 'playing' with the children, in the sense of affectionate banter, jokes and, more obviously, in the playground, etc. This 'play' helps to build happy memories for the children (and the adults), as it helps them think more positively about themselves and their lives as they experience adults' affection in this playfulness. Positive memories are also used in alternative approaches to problematic behaviour. One day, when Lizzie began to act up, Kevin (mentor at Sparks) only needed to say to her 'You remember that burger last night' for Lizzie to smile and calm down. Lizzie and Ruby (mentor) had been out for a special meal together the night before. We turn now to other responses to problematic behaviour that we observed.

Building bridges

As we have previously described, children and young people often feel cornered by past attempts at controlling their behaviour, and by their reputations. Given this situation, staff at Sparks and St John's try to avoid responding to problematic behaviour in ways that children and young people are familiar with, and that they know they dislike. Within a framework of clear rules and expectations of behaviour,

and the consistent issue of sanctions and punishments (as described in other texts on working with 'at risk' pupils, e.g. Cooper *et al.*, 2000), staff respond to problematic behaviour in ways that explicitly set out to 'build bridges' with young people. Punishment is communicated in ways that underline that it is not about 'rejection'.

It was very unusual, for example, to hear an adult shout in Sparks. As Ruby (mentor at Sparks) described, expressing anger through shouting is 'like chucking petrol on the fire'. Staff emphasise that other forms of discipline that make children feel humiliated are likely to be counterproductive, as this increases the likelihood that children will want to display their resentment in angry, violent behaviour. It is also the case that an angry, resentful child is unlikely to settle easily to school work. Similarly, staff will avoid setting activities during the school day that might make children feel exposed and humiliated, such as reading aloud (Kellett, 2007, forthcoming). Rather than focusing directly on behaviour, adults will try to divert children to other activities. This fits with their knowledge that these children have experienced repeated reprimands, sometimes for very small incidents that are best 'let go'.

> Lloyd (mentor at Sparks) describes his approach with Fabian when he keeps 'kicking off' in class:
>
> > With Fabian, it's humour, so I say to him 'I know what's happening, I know what's going on here, you went to bed late and that's why you're so cranky' and then I let him talk.
>
> Sure enough, Fabian had been watching the story of the Twin Towers until late and tells Lloyd all about it. Lloyd continues:
>
> > So all this time, we're just walking round the building and, when we get back to the front, I just say to him, 'now you need to get back into the classroom and get on with the work'.

Where behaviour requires an intervention – for example, when it is disrupting learning or causing other children to misbehave – adults' responses are characterised by a willingness to engage with the behaviour in a non-confrontational way, and help the child 'move on'. As Diane (mentor at Sparks) described, one of their key aims is to help children develop 'a brake on their behaviour'. One response by the adults is to make suggestions that allow children a 'breathing space'. Thus adults would say things like:

Are you OK – do you want to take a break?

Would you like some 'time out'?

Would you like a drink?'

These suggestions were described as (potentially, at least) 'win-win' responses, as they avoid making the child feel 'under attack' and this helps to prevent an angry response. Any positive behaviour that is adopted will next be highly praised. This, in turn, helps to continue to build children's self-confidence that they can take control. Adults are also careful to attend to the audiences in their attempts at helping children and young people think about their behaviour, recognising that there are issues of status in being seen to 'back down' or admit to doing wrong in front of one's peers, and sometimes one's parents.

> Pat (head teacher at Sparks) is walking round the class handing out gold slips. She says 'you are all working really well'. Dean has been quiet and focused throughout the session. 'That's a very good way of listening to the story', she says. On her second 'lap' round the room she stops to talk to Lizzie, 'do you like that story?' She returns to Dean and asks him quietly 'did it go OK last night?' He nods and she smiles. Looking straight at him, she says 'I'm really pleased with the way you're concentrating'.
>
> One morning recently, when the mentors arrived at Dean's house, his Mum was raging and had shouted at them about him. She calmed down and told them she was being weaned off her depression medication and was just not coping. Dean has been going through a bad patch at school. One strategy has been to send him to Pat's office when he kicks off, where 'everything comes out'. Pat also responds by spending time in the classroom, giving encouragement and praise.

In staying very close to the children and to what is going on at home, workers are also able to support the children in highly differentiated ways through particularly difficult patches. This helps to divert really difficult behaviour, or minimise it, and this personalised response to children's needs is observed and appreciated not just by the individual concerned but also by the other children.

This behaviour, then, sends out a strong message about the ethos of the institution to everyone involved, and this ethos also seems to help when further situations of conflict occur.

Another contrast with mainstream schools relates to adult emotions in response to problems and challenges in the classroom. Ruby (mentor at Sparks) described how, one day, the mentors there had been struggling with several children at once and how it had been counterproductive to 'beg them to take it easy'. Things had only got worse 'because by doing it that way you're giving them bricks to throw at you'. Staff also sometimes become very upset by children's behaviour. Children, knowing that the adults care, will sometimes behave in ways specifically to provoke these responses. It is regarded as really important, however, that this care does not express itself in 'taking things personally'.

Ruby (mentor at Sparks):

I mean these little terrors are in bad shape. These kids have been to hell and back. They come here – why the hell should they trust us. We're just a gang of adults, like at their last school. Eventually – I will push you and push you and push – I'm going to prove myself right, because you're going to start shouting and get nasty with me.

But this is the beauty of tagging each other. I know that, if at any point I'm getting hooked, we're human at the end of the day, we're not super human beings, but we have learned to walk away. It's somebody else's turn and we're that good as a team – I shouldn't really blow my own trumpet like this – but you just have to look at each other, we don't need words. Never let the child know that he has got to you, because nine times out of ten, in fact probably ten times out of ten, that little one, when he's landed, he will come to you for a hug and a cuddle and tell you how very, very, very sorry they are.

A final element of this brief description of 'building bridges' with children and young people relates to responding to *their* approaches – to children and young people's desire to make connections with adults. If children begin to trust workers, and want to talk to them, feel affection for them and so on, they will feel able, and will *want* to, initiate conversations, ask questions, look for physical affection and so on. These approaches need to be responded to if connections between adults and children are going to build. It became clear to us through the research that these connections are essential to many of the interventions that take place.

Dealing with distress

This final section outlines the more direct 'emotion work' that helps to build children and young people's capacity to take control of their own behaviour. Pat (head teacher at Sparks) describes how, if they are going to cope better with their circumstances and engage with educational opportunities:

> … it must be a child that can deal with his distress, in some way. Take responsibility for it. And be able to cope somehow with it. Know what it is.

We have already described how staff at Sparks encourage children to give themselves some 'breathing space' when they begin to struggle and they are urged to 'take a break' or 'time out', etc. Staff always also offer to provide help if the child is having problems with school work and to listen if they want to talk about anything. In addition to being given an opportunity to talk, children are offered other ways of expressing their feelings, for example through the use of 'feelings cards' or by using toy figures. They are encouraged to see emotions like anger as separate from the person who is expressing that anger (see vignette below). This depersonalisation helps the child see that they might be able to control that anger and also underlines that they are not being defined by the problem behaviour. This sort of conversation, we believe, is only possible when a child has come to trust an adult, likes that adult, and does not feel they are being 'attacked' or 'cornered' by an intervention.

Lizzie has run away from school after having her mobile phone confiscated. On her way out of the building, she expresses her rage by tearing down some displays in the corridor. Pat (head teacher at Sparks) gets straight on the phone to Lizzie's Mum, Pam, to tell her that Lizzie has run away. Lizzie's Mum is happy to let Ruby (mentor at Sparks) try to sort things out. In the meantime, Ruby goes out and catches Lizzie up. Ruby updates Pat by phone, who phones Pam again to let her know they are on their way back to Sparks. When they return there is no immediate focus on Lizzie running away but, quite casually, she is asked if she'd like to repair the displays she tore down. After some further 'breathing space', Ruby asks Lizzie if she'd like to talk about what happened earlier.

Ruby and Lizzie – very quietly, very calmly – sit next to each other in a classroom and talk about the incident. There is no reproof in Ruby's voice, no hectoring, no sense of blame or anger.

> R: What are we going to do if it kicks off in athletics?

(Continued)

L: Time out. I don't know my way home from athletics.

R: Do you know your way home from here?

L: Yes.

R: Your Mum thought you were better off here than going home and better to repair the damage. What do you feel?

L: OK.

R: Have you got feelings Lizzie? *[Comes over as genuine inquiry, not an accusation.]*

L: Yeah.

Ruby begins a drawing.

R: Do you know what this is? This is good me and bad me. What's it called, your anger?

L: I don't know – Angry Arthur is it?

R: What should we do with him?

L: Keep him in the back.

R: Draw him – get him in the back instead of thrashing about. Get in control there Lizzie – I want to see you keeping him in the back all day. You never see me let go of the steering wheel do you? Keep your hands on the steering wheel – well, OK, you do occasionally see me taking my hands off the wheel. *[Laughter and lots of smiling throughout.]*

Ruby admires Lizzie's hair.

L: I can never get to the bottom of my hair cos it's too tangled – my Mum was in bed this morning and I couldn't get to the bottom of my hair.

(Continued)

Lizzie finishes her drawing

> *L:* Done it *[lighthearted]*.

> *R:* Look how happy you are *[on the drawing]*.

Lizzie does some more on the drawing.

> *R:* We need to find you a quiet place when you are struggling. You
> need to have a place where you can take yourself in here, or
> maybe out there on the stone – but you be careful about going out
> of school like that – there are a lot of creeps out there *[delivered
> low key – this is a reality – not I'm trying to shock or scare you – I
> want to protect you]*. I want to see your face when you are thrashing
> about *[back to the picture now]*. See it's not good for Lizzie is it?
> So how does that feel then, do you have a nasty feeling in your
> stomach?

> *L:* My head pounds. I get a headache. It feels like someone punching
> me in the head. Can I go toilet?

> *R:* Come straight back.

Lizzie returns.

> *R:* So it's not a disease you know – it's not that – but dis – at – ease
> you know, your anger.

Staff at St John's and Sparks believe it is important to challenge children and young
people about some of their behaviour. In other words, their approach does not end
with non-confrontational responses to problem behaviour or with helping children
control their behaviour, it extends to helping them become more analytical about their
behaviour and about their attitudes. In respect of these 'challenges', staff say things
to children and young people that are not very different from many things they have
probably heard before. The contrast, however, relates to children and young people's
responses to these interventions – for example, in being willing to listen, in not
'flying off the handle', in engaging in a debate about the issues, in contributing their
point of view, and so on (see vignette below). These responses reflect the positive
relationships that exist between adults and children/young people.

Saul is shortly to move on to a special school. His behaviour has improved enormously and he participates in many more activities than he used to. He is in the computer room with some of the other children. Steve (mentor) arrives and watches him.

Saul keeps getting up and walking over to a table where some grapes have been left, picking off a single grape and then going back to his computer. As Saul returns to his computer for the third time, Steve says:

> I want to talk to you Saul. I am concerned about you. You're not doing what you should be doing and you're not where you should be. When you go to your next school, they won't have you doing that. So you need to settle in a routine so that the school works for you.

Saul looks intently at Steve. 'Do you understand me Saul?' He nods solemnly.

We have already touched on the necessity for adults to be 'in charge' of their emotions and not to use them as pleas for good behaviour. Adults do, however, talk about their emotions, as it is regarded as important for children and young people to understand the effects of their behaviour on others. Adults expect children and young people to apologise, for example, when they have said or done something that the adult has found upsetting or hurtful. They will also make clear that they might not be ready to accept an apology if they are not ready to 'forgive and forget'. In such an instance staff explain the emotions they are experiencing in a matter-of-fact way, avoiding anger and 'emotional blackmail', but making clear *their* feelings and responses. We also saw staff talk about their anger with the children, but in such a way as to avoid *expressing* anger. For example, Steve (mentor at Sparks) escorts Saul out of the hall during wet play. Saul starts kicking and punching, 'fuck off, you can't touch me'. Steve comes back and, before resuming the game with the others, goes and stands at the window. 'What do you think I'm doing now', he asks. He looks drained. One of the kids says 'resting', another 'taking a break'. 'Yes', he says, 'I'm grinding my feet into the ground, breathing deep, clenching my fists and letting go, because I'm so angry'. He takes a deep breath and restarts the game. 'We'll have another five minutes. Well done for being so good during that disruption.'

Steve (mentor at Sparks):

I will hear teachers talk about children that are pressing their buttons – some of the things they say are not very nice and it doesn't help me. I don't want to hear those things. If I hear someone talk like that I walk away, and that's how I feel. I can get like that but I don't go round saying *[things like that]*.

And I teach the kids that, rather than let it come out here *[signals mouth]*, you can still say it up there *[signals head]*. But then, if you need to say it – if there's a reason for saying it – you say it and why you need to do it. And, if you don't do it, it'll become a bubble and fester.

It is important in these conversations that the adult uses the word 'I', as Ruby (mentor at Sparks) explained. This is one element of the ways in which staff model behaviour for children and encourage them to 'own' their feelings. Rather than casting blame or making accusations, they are encouraged to recognise and name their feelings. As Steve (mentor at Sparks) describes, staff are attentive to the fact that their behaviour needs to follow the same expectations they have for the children. Mentors understand that resentment builds up for children when they see different rules applying to children and to adults. In this respect, mentors will, for example, make clear that they misinterpreted events, apologise very clearly when they know they are in the wrong and use the same tone of respect and good manners towards children as they expect *from* children:

Joe loses face every day and you're not prepared to lose face over something, you know. Because I've seen it happen, and adults keep shtum about it and the child's getting into trouble about it. And a child will never forget those little things because, if it's not fair and square in their world, why should I bother, why should I bother?
(Steve, mentor at Sparks)

On the bus on the way home, Ruby (mentor at Sparks) asks Toby to move forward to the seat beside Dale. He ignores her at the time and, as she's driving, she doesn't say anything. When she stops the bus at Toby's house, she asks him 'What was that about, why didn't you move up when I asked you to?' Toby tells her: 'I didn't want to sit next to Dale, he acts dead silly'. Ruby: 'That's you taking care of yourself, I thought you were being defiant of me'. Toby goes into his house with Lloyd (mentor at Sparks) but emerges again soon after with his baby brother to show off to Ruby.

The formal curriculum is also used, wherever possible, to debate emotions and feelings, choices and consequences. It is regarded as important to help children become familiar and practised at making choices and thinking about the consequences of those choices in situations that do not involve conflict or high emotion. This helps to establish an ethos that assists when there are conflicts and when punishments or sanctions have to be imposed. Children are given other opportunities to take responsibility for their own behaviour and to build confidence in relation to being in control of their behaviour, through being encouraged to set their own 'behaviour targets' for the following week.

It's time to set targets for behaviour. Lizzie is fidgeting, slouching on the chair and pulling her cardigan over her face. She mutters 'boring, boring' under her breath. Greg (teacher at Sparks) goes round the room asking people to say what their goal for next week will be. Lizzie doesn't want to say anything and Greg moves on to the next person. Liam: 'Stop turning around in class so I can get back to normal school'. Frankie: 'Stop walking out of lessons'. Fabian: 'Accept adult decisions'. Greg comes back to Lizzie: 'Maybe you could make it your goal not to say boring all the time'. He writes 'to be positive' on the board. 'What do you think?', Greg asks next. 'Are these short-term goals or long-term goals?' The conversation continues.

We have already referred to the 'low-key' approach to reviewing problematic behaviour on the bus on the way home from school. Such an approach confirms for children that adults will 'follow through' with affection and concern in addressing problems and avoid the implication that bad behaviour is equated with being a 'bad person'. The tone throughout is one in which the adult tries to communicate that the child can depend on them, they are 'in this' together. One day, after an outing, one of the researchers commented on how well behaved the kids had been. Ruby (mentor at Sparks) explained:

It's because they know we mean what we say and say what we mean and, if there's a problem, they'll sit on the bus. We're not turning back because of them.

We came to regard this refusal to 'turn back' as also a refusal to 'turn their backs', emotionally speaking, on the children or their families, including when there are real and continuing problems.

We saw the approach that we describe help 'hard to reach' children, young people and families cope much better with the problems in their lives. The work cannot directly alleviate the difficult economic and social circumstances that many of them face but it can help them engage in different ways with those problems. It is a massive task and, inevitably, the change that occurs is evolutionary not revolutionary. We believe that such work can make a long-term difference to the children and young people involved (as also suggested by other research, e.g: Marshall *et al*., 1999; McNeill and Batchelor, 2002; Case, 2006; Newburn and Shiner, 2006).

Every Child Matters (2003) makes a commitment to 'narrowing the gap between disadvantaged children and their peers'. The gaps that *Every Child Matters* identifies relate to educational outcomes and other indicators such as teenage pregnancy and the number of children not in education, employment or training. This research has identified other types of gap in these children and young people's lives (home–school relations, commitment to school, self-confidence, trust in caring adults, and so on) and has described how special adults committed to closing those gaps might go about that work. We believe that further investment in the sort of work we describe will continue to be essential to addressing the multiple needs of families living with poverty/multiple disadvantage and to supporting those permanently excluded from school, or self-excluding, to engage with educational and other opportunities in their lives.

5 Conclusions

This research has implications for a number of different groups in relation to policy and practice in the area of permanent exclusions from school. It describes an approach that impacts positively on very 'hard to reach' children, young people and parents, taking into account poverty and multiple disadvantage. As described in the introduction to the report, particular groups experience disproportionate numbers of permanent exclusions, including those living in poverty and black and dual-heritage children/young people. We believe this research throws light both on why there is this disproportionality in exclusions and on how education and other services can work productively with the children/young people and parents who are most directly affected.

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There is no 'quick fix' available for work with 'hard to reach' children and families. Children and young people's responses to punitive measures (such as punishments at school, exclusion from school, ASBOs, etc.) suggest these punitive measures provoke resistance and further disengagement from the 'system'. The alternative, which is likely to involve multiple interventions across multiple problems, requires long-term investment. This is likely to be necessary if all children are to meet *Every Child Matters* (2003) targets.

The evaluation of ameliorative work with 'hard to reach' families needs to reflect the long-term, affective and often incremental nature of this work. Changes are likely to be evolutionary not revolutionary and require sensitive and responsive approaches to judging 'success'.

Bureaucratic requirements for the formalisation of services to 'hard to reach' families may undermine the very qualities necessary to this work – informality, staff commitment, a needs-led approach, intrinsic rewards and so on. Local responses to needs may need flexibility in order to function and this should be reflected in the forms of support available and the expectations on these organisations.

Further research is required in relation to understanding the nature and causes of pupils' disaffection from mainstream school, including issues such as institutional racism. Work with schools that can help them 'close the gaps' between all parties then needs to take place.

Local authorities

This research has highlighted the special contribution of mentors and teaching assistants who work with very 'hard to reach' parents and their children. This contribution is not currently reflected in appropriate remuneration that reflects the work they do rather than the formal qualifications they have. It could also be reflected in greater opportunities to meet with other staff facing similar challenges and to share their knowledge and experience with teachers.

The study also illustrates the role of non-traditional specialist units that attend to the particular needs of children and young people. Many young people classified NEET (not in education, employment or training), in particular, may need this kind of tailored help. This type of work requires the support of local authorities, which also need to recognise that the outcomes for young people are likely to be different to those from mainstream schools. This is not to suggest that young people who attend specialist provision should not be given access to all educational opportunities but that they may need tailored help in order to access them.

Work with 'hard to reach' families is not reducible to a formula or set of procedures that anyone can adopt. The work relies on the relationships at the centre of the endeavour. This requires local authorities to take a 'holistic' view on the appointment of staff, which takes into account attributes and qualities not generally acknowledged in job specifications. It may also need flexibility in relation to the minimum requirements for posts in this area. This then raises issues regarding pay for 'non-traditional' applicants. There is a danger that staff carrying out this challenging work are penalised through lower pay because of their lack of formal qualifications.

Local authorities might consider whether the specialist work we describe could be utilised in the form of 'respite' from mainstream school for some children and young people (i.e. a short 'break' from school for intensive work elsewhere). We also believe that the expertise we describe could usefully be shared with mainstream schools through focused training/development activities.

The importance of parents and young people having some control over their education, and the difficulties associated with the sense of being marginalised within the education system, were evident in the study. This suggests it is vital for local authorities to consult parents and young people in relation to their preferred choices for educational provision after a permanent exclusion from school.

Our work supports the findings of Wright *et al.* (2005) that local authorities:

> … should facilitate partnership working with the Black voluntary sector for identifying and understanding the needs of African-Caribbean young people and to benefit from their ability to engage successfully with young people from these communities. It is important that this partnership is given due recognition and funded accordingly.

Extended schools

The approach to children, young people and parents that we describe in this report is relevant to extended schools if they wish to engage the most 'hard to reach' families. The study indicates that, if these families are to be engaged in extended schools, they will need targeted interventions that take into account their feelings of disaffection from mainstream school.

Further research

The study raises a number of issues that would benefit from further research. First, research should be carried out in mainstream schools to understand better the current pressures on teachers in terms of providing social and emotional support to children, and how they might adopt and adapt the approach that has been described in this report.

Given the centrality of work with parents to making progress with disaffected pupils, we recommend further research on the challenges that mainstream schools face in working more closely with parents.

Finally, some of the specific and very sensitive causes of disaffection mentioned in this study (e.g. institutional racism) should be explored from the perspectives of both teachers and students. This could lead into action research that explores how such issues might be tackled in schools and the consequences of doing so.

Notes

Chapter 1

1   We use the term 'social exclusion' here to indicate both the income poverty of most families in this study and other forms of exclusion that are usually linked to poverty (Hirsch, 2006), such as poor housing conditions, high crime environments, lack of employment and physical and mental health problems (Milbourne, 2002a). Like Macrae *et al.* (2003, p. 96), we wish any definition of social exclusion to 'incorporate a challenge to those who exclude' such that the 'problem' is not individualised and takes into account 'causes located at policy and institutional level'. We are also aware that the language of social exclusion masks 'local experiences of inequality and also obscures disparate experiences' (Milbourne, 2002a, p. 288).

2   Most of the young people we worked with had either a supervision order or an ASBO (anti-social behaviour order), or were in the criminal justice system. One had a 'tag'. Several of the younger age group have ASBOs or have received warnings from the police about their behaviour.

3   For an in-depth study of the policy and practice in two local authorities, see Thomson and Russell (2007, forthcoming).

4   St John's is in the voluntary sector. It receives funding from the Neighbourhood Support Fund (NSF) to help support a youth group. For three years, St John's was also funded by the local education authority to run daytime classes in recognition of the work it was already doing with many disaffected and self-excluding African-Caribbean and dual-heritage young people. In this period it supported 43 young people.

5   It was largely the concern that St John's would not meet the requirements of an Ofsted inspection that caused the local authority to withdraw funding for daytime classes. Funding was also withdrawn from three other specialist units providing classes to permanently excluded KS3 and KS4 students. As we write this final report, St John's has become responsible, again, for the education of a small number of young people. In addition, in recognition of the work it has done in the past, several secondary schools are proposing informal arrangements with St John's to support young people who are 'at risk' of exclusion from school. This constantly changing picture is parallel to the sometimes 'complex, unstable and uncoordinated' organisation of support for 'at risk' young people as described by Thomson and Russell (2007, forthcoming).

6   Work funded by the Cariocca Education Trust (Edwards-Kerr and Frankham, 2004) explored the experiences of a small number of African-Caribbean boys who had been excluded from school who attended St John's. Humphrey and Holdsworth carried out a study of support strategies employed at Sparks in 2004 (not yet published).

7   Attendance at St John's was approximately 90 per cent, despite young people having to travel long distances to get there. Ofsted (2006) recently reported attendance at Sparks as 'very high for a PRU at 92% overall for Autumn term 2005'. Reed (2005) reports that attendance at PRUs is generally a significant problem and suggests there are considerable numbers of young people who 'self-exclude' from a PRU after a permanent exclusion from school.

8   All names of individuals and institutions are pseudonyms.

Chapter 2

1   'Webster Stratton' is a recognised parenting course developed in the US. It includes sessions on issues such as 'Playing with your child', 'Developing understanding' and 'Handling challenging behaviour.'

Chapter 3

1   Our observations and interviews would suggest many similarities between the two institutions in terms of staff ethos, values and behaviour.

Chapter 4

1   Sparks does mirror school in respect of the National Curriculum, however, and is subject to Ofsted inspections under the same criteria as other pupil referral units and special schools.

2   Funded by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation as part of this research.

3   The benefits of this 'out of hours' work are echoed by Wikeley *et al*. (2007, forthcoming).

4   Mentors are not paid over the summer and Sparks has to raise funds, usually from a charity, to pay costs for the scheme. The Children's Fund has supported this work for the last two years.

5   The youth group and after-school clubs at St John's are run on a voluntary basis by Lester and Catherine (mentors) with help from other volunteers. Costs are met by a small contribution from the Neighbourhood Support Fund.

6   Funds have to be raised for these activities. In the past, the Children's Fund has supported some of this work. In 2006, the Joseph Rowntree Foundation paid for the residential.

7   This work (and the playscheme in the summer holiday) is a form of 'extended service' at Sparks and St John's. Ofsted reported in 2006 that after-school clubs 'are boosting young people's self-confidence and attitudes to learning' (*Guardian*, 2006).

8   Many of the students we worked with had reading difficulties, although some of them were high achievers prior to their exclusion. One of the advantages of the relatively small numbers at Sparks and St John's is the availability of one-to-one support with learning needs.

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