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The Child and the Special Needs Family at Home: A Social Worker's Point of View

In considering the overall welfare of pupils with special needs, the educational work of the special school can be greatly augmented by the services of a professional Social Worker. Teachers may be only partially aware of the home circumstances of the children in their charge. The Social Worker through home visits can provide vital feedback to school staff on the home and family dimension of the child's life.

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INTRODUCTION: STEWART'S HOSPITAL SERVICES

It may be useful to outline briefly the services provided by Stewart's Hospital as some of our pupils avail of these services before starting their formal education and continue to do so perhaps for most of their lives. Stewart's Hospital offers a comprehensive community based service situated in South West Dublin and is linked with a residential service that has been in existence since 1869.

Responding to the needs and abilities of each individual entrusted to its care forms a major part of Stewart's philosophy. By providing a wide range of programmes within a caring supportive environment, both children and adults are given the opportunity to grow and develop personally in terms of acquired skills enabling each to achieve a life of meaning and reward. In recent times, Stewart's facilities have been extensively rebuilt along "village" lines. Residents with similar needs are housed in modern bungalows within a complex which includes the whole range of educational, occupational and recreational facilities. In addition, Stewart's operate a community based residential programme. These are ordinary houses within local communities which accommodate an average of five residents and are staffed by trained hospital personnel.

In 1993, we had 247 residents on site and 53 in community based homes. Stewart's now caters for nearly 200 day attenders from the South West area of

Dublin. We also have a School of Nursing, whose three year course leads to the qualification R.M.H.N. - Registered Mental Handicap Nurse.

STEWART'S HOSPITAL SERVICES

- **Infant Stimulation Programme** - Home Based Service;
- **Preschool** - For Developmentally Delayed Children;
- **Special School** - Caters for the 4-18 year old age group;
- **Assessment Clinic** - For Diagnosis and Counselling;
- **Short Term Care** - Respite for Parents;
- **Long Term Care** - Day Activity, Social Training and Occupational Therapy;
- **Pre Vocational Training;**
- **Leitrim Lodge** - Horticultural Training Unit;
- **Palmerston Lodge** - Inpatient Psychiatric Treatment;
- **Laundry** - Provides Services for Residents and other Organisations;
- **Catering Department** - Modern Cook-Chill Facilities;
- **Ronanstown Community Centre** - Training in Co-Operation with Local Community and FÁS;
- **Balgaddy Community Service;**
- **Family Support Scheme.**

THE ROLE OF THE SOCIAL WORKER IN THE SPECIAL SCHOOL

The Social Worker attached to a special school has a varied life. Liaising between parents and teachers and other team members is an essential and central part of the work. Initial contact with parents may happen through the assessment procedure when a child is on our waiting list or is placed in our school. Referrals may come from community care services in the area and other special schools. Some children go to our school from our preschool.

A home visit is usually arranged as quickly as possible to provide an introduction to the service and to complete a social history. It helps to begin by explaining how the Social Worker can offer support and act as a link between the family and the school. Some families have already dealt with other social workers and may have set ideas about what we do or have set attitudes towards us, depending on their previous experience and relationships with social workers in the past. It can often break the ice to just chat informally and to explain what positive things we have to offer to a pupil and his/her family. Most parents are entitled to particular

welfare benefits or allowances in relation to their child's handicap and welcome information regarding this or assistance in applying for whatever entitlements are on offer to them.

PERCEPTIONS OF THE SOCIAL WORKER'S ROLE

Some parents associate the Social Worker with hand-outs of some sort, be it financial assistance, letters to the Welfare Officer pleading their individual cases of hardship, or a source of clothes, food, furniture etc. Some see us as a handy taxi-driver or messenger. Of course we do provide these things from time to time but only as part of the wider professional service.

Some parents associate Social Workers with taking children into care and may be very wary of being spied on or judged as to how well they manage their children. They may therefore be hostile or reluctant to let us know much about the family history. In some cases families have had particular problems or incidents in the past that they find difficult to talk about or to come to terms with and all of these things influence how open they may be to co-operating or sharing information.

When we first meet parents they may be very upset or shocked, or may be going through a crisis. It is up to us at this early stage to offer whatever is appropriate at the time. It may be just a sympathetic ear or it may be specific information, advice or practical intervention to help out in some way.

UNDERSTANDING PARENTS' FEELINGS AND OPINIONS

It is important to establish some sort of rapport as soon as possible. A useful way of doing this is to acknowledge the difficulties that may have to be faced on a day to day basis and to let parents know that it is understood that caring for a child with special needs is no easy task and can be very stressful for everyone at home. Often parents just need permission to admit that there are times that they feel like walking out or exploding if they've reached the end of their tether and that they are not the only ones who feel like this from time to time. They need to be reassured that it is actually quite normal to find it hard to cope. No one can always be organised, good humoured and on top of the housework as well as being able to meet the needs of perhaps a very dependent, demanding and different child.

When doing an initial social history, one needs to be sensitive towards parent's feelings and opinions and their situation and mood at the time. Firing specific

questions regarding dates, medical history and filling out forms may be inappropriate and intimidating. A chat over a cup of tea may yield the required information or at least give way for a further more focused interview later on. If someone is upset or worried or just confused and bewildered with having to talk to yet another professional, this needs to be acknowledged and dealt with, if possible, before moving on.

Follow up and regular contact is necessary to maintain communication with families. We should, hopefully, develop a trusting open relationship so that people will be able to let us know when they're finding it tough going or to fill us in on any changes in the home situation which may upset the child's routine, behaviour or sense of security. We also want to help families maximise use of the available services and to alleviate stress wherever possible.

PROFILE OF STEWART'S SCHOOL - 1993

Total No. of Pupils:	105
Day Attenders:	94
Residents in Stewart's:	11
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Living in Bungalows on Site:	6
Living in Hostels in Community:	5
Day Attenders:	94
Living in Residential Care Outside of Stewart's	3
Living with Grandparents:	1
Living with One Parent:	17
Living with Both Parents:	73

WORKING WITH MULTI-PROBLEM FAMILIES

Seventeen of our pupils are known to have a sibling who also has a handicap. In our school we have 6 sets of brothers/sisters so we often deal with more than one in the family.

Of our day attenders only 8 families have both parents working. Forty-one families have one parent employed and 40 have the head of the household unemployed. Seven of our pupils are Travellers.

Almost half of our pupils come from families where unemployment is a main contributory factor to their hardship. Some families of children with special needs are experiencing particularly difficult life circumstances. Living on social welfare in a deprived area can be very stressful. Many of our families live in local authority housing in neighbourhoods which have become ghetto-ised and where isolation and victimisation may be a fact of life.

PROFILE OF PROBLEM FAMILY CIRCUMSTANCES

Teachers may be unaware of the home circumstances of the children. It is therefore crucial that we as Social Workers give continuous feedback to school staff on contact we have with parents and our experiences on home visits. In some houses, children do not even have their basic needs met. It is a real eye-opener to visit homes and to see the actual physical environment, meet the rest of the family and sense the atmosphere or relationships within a family.

If there is no one getting up for work, children may have to get themselves ready for school and may not be capable of washing, feeding or dressing themselves properly in time for the school bus. Illiteracy is a widespread problem and we cannot assume that people can read or write, let alone have access to certain foodstuffs. Often teachers send notes or letters home in school bags, notifying parents of meetings and seeking permission or money needed for school tours or ingredients for cookery class. Literacy problems inhibit parents' ability to help with homework.

Very few of our families have phones, which hampers contact, especially in an emergency situation. So, before criticising parents for their lack of response to messages from school, it is wise to check that it has been firstly received and secondly, interpreted correctly. Parents may be dependent on the social worker or public health nurse to read and explain letters. A verbal message through a bus driver may help.

CONFLICTS IN HOME AND SCHOOL EXPECTATIONS

Often financial difficulties rather than lack of interest is the reason for low/non attendance at parents meetings. It is important to realise that for some people

there is no source of credit or access to money in an emergency. Many people will not have bank accounts, credit cards and will resort to borrowing to pay bills.

Some of our pupils live in very unhappy homes where there are perhaps alcohol or drug problems, financial worries and possibly violence or abuse. Children who crave attention or act out in school may do so for a particular reason. Teachers should be on the look out for telltale signs of a child being upset or off form and try to establish a reason for it. Often home circumstances or child rearing practices militate against the child's comfort and adjustment in school. We need to accept that families have their own ways of doing things and their own values and these need to be respected. Of course we do have a responsibility to encourage people to improve their skills and basic levels of care but this can be a very sensitive area and needs to be handled appropriately. Social workers have a crucial role in informing parents about school expectations in relation to hygiene, dress and behaviour.

COMMUNICATING WITH PARENTS: THE HOME VISIT

Communication is perhaps the most important issue in dealing with people. The Social Worker must be able to communicate with the parents, the pupils themselves and of course school staff and other team members. It is crucial to share information because this enables others to fit the jigsaw together when working with our pupils.

Often a home visit can give great insight into what exactly is going on at home. Sometimes parents are really under pressure and often, observing a child in its own environment can be very interesting. Some parents lock their children in to contain them. Some parents are rarely at home; siblings do the babysitting. Some of our parents are mentally handicapped and therefore the level of stimulation or understanding of a child's needs can be quite poor. There are families who have horrific problems and are living in constant disharmony and hardship. And others who have had terrible tragedies. These things may not have become apparent except through time spent in the effort of getting to know parents and becoming a welcome visitor to a home on a regular basis where one can see what goes on.

COMMUNICATING WITH PARENTS: ATTITUDE

Talking to parents can sometimes be difficult. It is important, initially, to present oneself properly and to enhance easy communication. It helps to dress

appropriately for the job and the environment. How we speak and our body language is important. Some parents find it very difficult to express themselves and others just don't have the vocabulary - particularly if they can't read and have never seen words written properly. Sometimes one has to make several attempts at interpreting what parents are talking about.

It is very important that we make ourselves understood. One must use the terms parents are familiar with and check that they've understood what you've told them, particularly if it is important news or information, because sometimes they hear what they want to hear, especially if there's something being told which is negative or upsetting for them. Denial of the situation can be common.

FLEXIBILITY OF SOCIAL WORKER'S ROLE

It also helps to get to know the children well and to be able to talk to them directly. For direct work particularly with teenagers, this is essential - but it takes time. It is a good idea to spend time each week in the school and join in some group activities where possible. Sometimes the idle chatter of the pupils tells more than a formal session.

As Social Workers, we need to be available when needed in a crisis. To provide an effective service one must be prepared to abandon planned work schedules and to be flexible in what tasks might be undertaken to help someone out. We may spend a whole day in care or have to try and find an emergency placement for someone who needs respite care. It can be quite stressful at times and we may not have all the answers or be able to provide what's needed immediately at the time, but we must try.

The Social Worker attached to a special school must let parents know what their role is and be involved with as many school activities as possible. This means participating in school events where possible or attending to lend support. One must grasp any opportunities available to meet parents especially as a group.

Attendance at parent/teacher meetings or speaking to the Parents' Association about developments in services or any relevant ideas or issues are important aspects of a social worker's role.

CONCLUSION

A Social Worker's job is never boring and really varies from day to day. We're out there meeting all sorts of people and certainly see the other side of life. We need to be broadminded and sometimes thick-skinned if we receive the sharp edge of someone's tongue. A sense of humour and hope is essential because one can get disillusioned or somewhat depressed at times when we realise just how rotten a hand life has dealt some people.

Above all we need to encourage and give credit where it's due. The majority of parents are coping reasonably well given their personal circumstances and most pupils are happy and much loved children who think there's no place like home.