



The Michael Sieff Foundation

Working together for children's welfare

**The Michael Sieff Foundation Anniversary Conference
20 YEARS ON**

**Preventing the abuse of children and young people and
protecting their emotional and mental health**

**19th - 21st November 2007
at Cumberland Lodge, Windsor Great Park**

**Camila Batmanghelidjh
Kids Company**

I would like to share with you what I have learnt over the last eleven years having worked with some really exceptional children and young people and maybe share with you what I think the outstanding issues are structurally

Kids Company works therapeutically in 33 schools across London. That means that we have a team leader in the school who is a qualified therapist usually psychotherapist and around that team leader we build up a team of about 20-22 workers who are either trainee social workers, psychotherapists, artists, musicians, health workers and so on. We do a full audit of what the pupils' needs are within that school so we have a sense of which pupils we are looking to support and to what level but rather than actually do it via the teachers referring or the staff referring, what we do is we create very colourable playrooms in the school and then we go and we speak in assembly to the children and we allow the children to self refer. Now this is a very good structure because it's not reliant on an adult and an adults competencies to get the child to the clinic so that the child can access support because one of the biggest flaws in the structures we've conceptualised for the most vulnerable children is that if the adult doesn't sustain the responsibility of attending appointments, often the children are deprived of the intervention. In this way what we are doing within Kids Company is that we're giving the therapeutic and social work intervention a protective layer of fun an acceptability because basically the majority of the children within the school will access some kind of service, either be it an art club or drama club or an outing and within that there will be children who will refer themselves for one to one therapy and social work intervention.

We identify all the houses of the children where there is severe depletion, our team go in clean the faeces, the rat and the cockroaches, make it relatively good and then the business employees go in and paint it in one day and pay for it. So in this way we've been able to use a lot of really creative resources to actually help the help to the kids. London University research shows that 78% of the children that we are working with are suffering from extreme stress, stress that is impacting their lives negatively.

Some 11,000 children use the provision every year and it's costing us £1.2 million because we're able to make such use of trainee resources so we have on placement with us some 30 trainee social workers, we have about 175 trainee psychotherapists who do their placement with us, we make use of about 200 mentors who befriend children and stay with them over a long period of time in addition to the city volunteers and in addition to our paid staff so it's actually a very good structure.

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Founder: Lady Elizabeth Haslam.

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The second bit of our provision is where much of the learning occurred which is on street level centres at street level. What they function is a substitute family structure so our philosophy is either strengthen the parent to do the parenting, if that's possible, or substitute some parenting, supplement it so be alongside the parent and strengthen them by doing a little bit us, a little bit the parent or completely in the case of some children where the parent is totally not functioning, substitute the parenting function. And the way we do is that we have 35 staff on duty in a given day, the same staff. They are not required to be off the premises in offices or anything, they're loosely in the setting so children arrive from the morning, let's say 9.00am-10.00am, we don't know on that day who is going to walk in through the door, we don't know what their problem is, we don't have an appointment system, it's open doors, any child can walk off the street and access the provision. When they come on our premises, if they are new children they arrive with no file and we know nothing about them and we have to piece their history together in order to find out what's happened to them. So we don't jump in and do an assessment, they hang about the pool table, they have a bit of food, they check us out and when they feel a bit more comfortable we'll do the assessment and what we are looking for is to actually work on a triangle of needs basically to meet all their basic needs because they arrive, 68% arrive homeless so immediately we have to find somewhere for them to live, sometimes we pay for them to go into hotels and then pursue Local Authorities to have them housed

There will be young people with psychosis, a range of mental type difficulties, they arrive addicted to street drugs, they often don't have clothes, they may be run by drug dealers as couriers, and there are a range of challenges that we have to address on the practical level before we even get to the point of addressing the emotional issues and the legacy of neglect and abuse that's there. And it's again a long term relationship build up so kids are given their key workers, some child may arrive six days a week on our premises and use it from morning to night until they feel a bit more ready to access services outside our agency like school. We have 13 qualified teachers who are teaching and many of the young people arrive unable to read and write and we basically have to deal with everything. Often it's an adolescent boy or girl who arrives on the premises and then alerts us to the needs of their younger siblings so our workers then go and do the home visit and try and get the younger siblings engaged. To give you a sense of the scale of it there are some 800 children expected with us on Christmas Day because their situation is so challenging that they need that extra support. Many of our young people are care leavers without adequate and appropriate support in the structures.

Delivering a therapeutic intervention without addressing the practical needs was meaningless so we had to develop a service that actually addressed the needs right across the range. That has meant that structurally we have found it very difficult to find funding because people can't understand are we a housing agency, are we a social work agency, are we a therapy agency, are we an educational provision, what are we? And it was precisely because they couldn't define us under any one department and because the kids were self referring. We have zero Local Authority funding because the kids are self referring and when we go back to the Local Authorities they want to pay for them and usually they say we wish you wouldn't find them. The other challenge is that when you are a street level voluntary agency and you are expecting a high standard of delivery on behalf of your children, for whatever reason because no judgement is made of the provisions that are out there, you end up in a situation where what I call the vanilla space which is when all professionals in a meeting know that they're not doing very well by that particular kid but they don't speak up. When you come as an agency and you don't agree to collude with that vanilla space and you protest and you say no I want something better for this kid or I want a higher level of provision or whatever, there is quite a considerable

amount of hatred and anger and rage that you are at the receiving end of as an agency and you need to be very resilient to hang in there.

I think there are major structural barriers within our own statutory and voluntary agencies that are prohibiting the development of appropriate services for the most vulnerable young people and I also think that we are still too dominant on structures that are conceived from the perspective of a functioning adult and that we haven't got to the point where we're structuring our services in such a way that we can really understand intellectually and emotionally how does a child who is really vulnerable, who doesn't have a competent carer in their lives, make their way to our services. Are we honestly providing structures that facilitate access to the most vulnerable and I think these are some of the questions that are still outstanding.

That brings me to my final signalling point which is that there is a culture of evaluation that is developing that's a big threat to the kind of mental health work that needs to be done with these young people and this culture of evaluation is stemming from economists who are evaluating voluntary agencies on behalf of philanthropists and these economists kind of come down to charities, compare one charity to another, they don't have any transparent structures by which they do these comparisons, they don't differentiate between an adult sexual abuse advice service and let's say another agency that has children turning up with multiple difficulties who can't even sit down let alone make use of counselling. They don't have the sophisticated evaluative tools and yet they are making recommendations about what charities should be funded and creating a kind of competitive structure within charities. I'm not against transparency for charity structures but I think the risk is that if we don't develop tools evaluating psychological distance travelled the risk is that these economists will dominate the narratives of our care delivery in a way that is very detrimental to what actually needs doing because now we know that the attachment experience is a brain regulating experience that you can actually calm a kid down by the kind of attachment relationship you provide. There is still no evaluative tool that can capture this other than the brain scans and the measuring the hormones at a given point and I think that we need to become much more articulate about fighting for the definition of quality in our own spaces and not allowing people who distribute the money to define what makes quality in our provisions.

Dan Dan: nice to meet you all. I first started with Kids Company because I was a troubled kid when I was younger. I didn't go to school, I just used to play about on buses making trouble, me and a little group of kids I was with. And one day I met a worker at Kids Company and he told me all about this place where I could go and stay out of trouble, so I thought let me give it a try and see what else there is in life you get me instead of playing about all the time. So I got to Kids Company and I went there and started activities; they put me back into school because I wasn't going to school. I did art, lots of lessons and that and it calmed me down a bit but then I left school again because the teachers, they didn't want to give me a chance to learn, they didn't want to help me. I used to ask teachers how to do this, how to do that, they used to get frustrated with me because I weren't as smart as the other kids. So I went back to Kids Company and found something I really like doing which is gym and I met a guy called Valentino so for the last year I've going doing gym sessions and hopefully I'll do a course next year to become a fitness instructor and be able to train kids who was like me. My aim in life now is just to help people who was like me, how I was before so when the kid is scared to talk to someone and be scared to say something to the Social Services about what's happening in your household or all the problems they're going through, basically through Kids Company you have friendships and you can build, what's that word, relationships with the person you're working with as a key worker and you become more confident when it comes to talking and speaking out loud to people and everything.

Jamal: I've been coming to Kids Company for nearly two years and basically the holistic approach that is taken has stabilised my life, my mental health and just my practical needs. By meeting my practical needs it means, like from the age of 14 I used to sleep with men for money, that's a fact. By the age of 16 I used to transport drugs for my then boyfriend so it means by meeting my practical needs, money, housing, so many different things that society's failed to provide, because every time I went for help I always accessed a brick wall. By providing these practical things it ensured that then I could slowly stabilise and get myself. There used to be like other provisions in Kings Cross, for young homeless people and Earls Court for like young black male teens who used to sell sex but I never really used to like to go there because it was so rigid, there were so many rules and stuff and they just wanted to institutionalise you and just almost make you morbid and sad and docile and I didn't want that so when I first came to Kids Company due to self referral at first I was very suspicious of it as I'd be very like I'd keep myself to myself and I'd only come at the end when it was closing because I was expecting Kids Company now to treat me how those other agencies had treated me because what it does it re-traumatises you like due to like parental addiction that my mum has and like childhood sexual abuse and things like. It all has an effect but coming to Kids Company it's like everything fits into place.

Dawn: I think what Kids Company has given me is and I think that it's a model that I grew up in care, I was a sort of like social work text case you know the bad social worker, the good social worker, all those different things, sent to a holiday camp in Wales to try and sort me out, all the things that you can imagine. But all those people ever wanted to do was get rid of me and move me on and nobody wanted to treat the whole problem and you know you have all these sort of experimental things as well like one of the children's homes I got moved to, you know I'm like some kid from a Council estate and I'd go to this sort of witch doctor's house who does Reiki healing on me and you know it's all these people trying to try all these different ways to sort you out but actually what you need is all of your needs met. If you don't really know, I think people think that people don't know what it's like to be hungry and not to have food in this country; people want to believe in Britain children don't live like that. And the thing is if you've really known what it's like to be hungry you're never going to let yourself get to that point so if someone doesn't deal with all your needs, like give you food, give you some money to do something like once a week go to the cinema, for you to be a complete person, then you can't, you know you can get the GCSEs, the A Levels, the degree but you can't sustain it because you're emotionally not ready and I think that's the big thing with Kids Company is therapy, and good therapy not therapy where you have to wait three years to get and then you get 10 sessions and told you get on your way. It's about a commitment and the thing that I think is whoever makes policy I assume that they're not mostly people from Council estates, I assume that they have some sort of moral standing and that they would want their children to be dealt with in a certain way and that when their kids were 16 or 18 they wouldn't just give up on them and kick them out but that's what we do to kids who don't have parents in this country and I think what Kids Company gives everybody is that they never give up on you and if it takes you 5 years to recover then you know if you've lived 15-16 years of hell then it's going to take you a long time to recover and so I just hope that this idea of treating the whole person and also the longevity of it and not always looking for quick results is something that really gets into the core of dealing with children.