

CASE NOTES

ADOPT A FAMILY - DIAL A GRANNY

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RATIONALE

The Dial-A-Granny service was set up in 1980 as a direct response to social need. It is a service whereby elderly citizens are integrated into the lives of young, isolated families for mutual support and life enrichment. Its indirect, but related, function is a preventative measure in cases of child abuse. Basically, it is an attempt from the outside to fill the gap left in traditional support patterns that has occurred with the breakdown of larger family groupings.

Once, Western society was made up of integrated patterns of family groups. Blood ties were regarded, as they still are in many Easter societies, as sacrosanct, and the duties involved in the maintenance of the family group were seen as taking precedence over the needs of the individual. Thus, although doubtless some loss of individual freedom did occur, for the most part there was a system of mutual inter-dependence and need fulfilment. Old and young all had their known place, and were tied closely enough to be of use to each other in their individual moments of need.

In the place of this, over the last few generations has grown a system where people are operating in increasing isolation from each other. Young families tend to migrate to dormitory suburbs where the mothers stay close to home all day, cut off from the neighbours who are new to them, their family, who are likely to live long distances away and the friends of their youth, who have been similarly scattered. Because there is no tradition of a 'village' or even suburban life or cohesive group activity, further opportunities of social interaction are denied them. The male parent, similarly, is estranged by long hours of often tedious work and a scene of prosaically limited options waiting him at the end of the day.

There are further, and less obvious, social stresses. The rapid rate of change is one. Technological bombardment is another. Loss of traditional value systems is another, as is extreme social mobility.

Institutions and systems of impossible complexity contribute to a restless sense of confusion whereby people feel they have less control over the direction of their lives. Under these circumstances, if people are already living in frustrating and alienating conditions, it is not surprising that many become a little distressed.

At the other end of the spectrum are many elderly citizens, caught in a different trap. These people are often deserted, to all intents and purposes. They are no longer 'of use' in a busy, materialistic society that puts the gaining of material comfort above the emotional and spiritual needs of its members. They become rejects at a time when they are most able and interested to offer the sum total of their lives' experiences to others.

In the midst of all this there are the children, and it is here that we come to the most urgent reason for the setting up of programmes such as 'Dial-A-Granny'. There is a frightening, and increasing, incidence of child abuse in our society. The causes of such violence are many, both collective and individual, socially learned and pathological and can be culturally or class derived. Frustration, deprivation, isolation and loss can all result in violence – the trigger is almost irrelevant and often quite trivial. The constant in the pattern is a combination of negative circumstances and, very often, in a classically destructive cycle, exposure to such violence as a child.

Whilst it is the dramatic events which bring response and services it is, in fact,

the duration of struggling that can make damage irrevocable. (Evidence for this has been identified by the ongoing enquiry of the South Australian Domestic Violence Committee and the South Australian Victims of Crime Enquiry, which completed its enquiry in January, 1982.) In other words, bureaucratic response, although it is, of course, important and necessary, can at times be at best piecemeal and at worst come too late.

The parent is the model of the child. Children, at least in the early years, are almost helplessly imitative creatures. It is from our parents that we derive not only our behavioural patterns but our own self-image. To this extent it is considered (Gill) that the child's right to optimum development takes precedence over the parents' basic psychological entitlement. In other words, it is as much on the basis of the priority of the child's right to a more complete self as for reasons of simple protection that the state justifies its interference in the lives of individuals. To this degree, the parents' rights depend on their parental ability.

Maturity is achieved when we have come to a balance between our own needs and rights and those of others. An abusing parent is often one who consciously or unconsciously blames his/her offspring for destroying their romantic picture of marriage and parenthood. Instead of a scenario of gentleness and fulfilment where they are loved and needed unquestionably, they find themselves in a demanding, tiring situation where they must do the unquestioning loving and the need is a constant demand, not a flattering request. In the same way that they (the abusers) hold unreal, and doomed, expectations of life, they have grossly advanced expectations of their child's behaviour. When the child cannot deliver, he/she becomes the target for this unresolved conflict.

The cycle continues in that the abused then provokes reactions in order to confirm their badness and attempt to create guilt in their parents in order to manufacture affection. The parents' intolerance of feelings of inadequacy and their lack of ego strength in the face of self-defeat causes an inappropriate ventilation of frustrations on the child, who then retains his/her hostility into adulthood. One of the aims of the 'Dial-A-

Granny' service is to interrupt this cycle of violence and to provide both support and a legitimate alternative pattern. Child abuse is a medical diagnosis needing social support and legal protection if necessary.

THE COMMUNITY'S RESPONSE

Child abuse is conceptualised in the potential of the parents, provocation of the child and the stresses of the environment. In response there exists a wide range of services, government and non-government, which attempt to help victims and their families. They are not directive and judicial constraints have been placed on intervention. South Australia has mandatory notification to the Department of Community Welfare for named classes of persons. However, the period of rehabilitation and the developmental diagnosis are not included in this definition.

Since long-term follow up is tedious and often resented, new creative programmes in co-ordination with orthodox approaches are overdue. In order to extend support and to prevent the transmission of the sort of deprivation that takes lives and retards growth, we must take all contributing factors into account. We feel that Dial-A-Granny does do this.

Last year eighteen people in South Australia were prosecuted for child abuse. In three months in 1975, two children died, twelve were permanently injured and four were re-battered in twenty families studied at the Adelaide Children's Hospital. These are not just statistics, these are people, and the ramifications of each individual case go far beyond the actual incident. Dial-A-Granny attempts to approach the problem from within, and on a human scale. As such, and used in conjunction with existing services, it has become a valuable, and alternative tool.



or absence of a sense of humour, as this can be a fairly crucial quality in difficult situations. All information was recorded on a card index.

Attempts to match needy families with an appropriate 'granny' or 'grannies' were then undertaken. This process could take several weeks, as we were concerned not to place any of the participants at risk. 'Grannies' could either contact their family by themselves or a meeting was arranged at our office. Since the program was first started in January, 1980, over 400 families have been matched.

The service itself is registered with the Company's Act as a Non Profit Business, and is insured for public liability. It is run on the basis of limited funding, which is used to cover advertising and office costs. The office space is donated

by the Unley Council, and the author supplemented expenses through her own funds.

Interest from the community and media has been considerable, both in South Australia and interstate. Unfortunately, the service cannot be publicised, as demand is barely containable as it is.

The target was retired couples of between 53-70 years of age. The main qualities requested were warmth, tolerance, time and experience to share their role and to extend the range of relationships and activities possible for the family. This would be sharing simple activities and services aimed at relieving the pressure on the young parents and providing companionship for all concerned.

Their availability could be particularly

THE ACTUAL FUNCTIONING OF THE DIAL-A-GRANNY PROGRAMME

The initial step taken was to place advertisements in community newspapers calling for elderly volunteers to participate in the programme. The requirements needed were basic and dictated largely by commonsense — warmth, energy and a practical and positive approach to coping with day to day events.

Requests for interviews were received and arranged for families and 'grannies' on weekends, between 3 p.m. and 6 p.m. at a small office in the Unley Senior Citizens Club, which is still the service base. Needs, expectations, motives, resources, dispositions, likes and dislikes were discussed by the participants. One special point was the existence

useful in times of illness or other crisis when the presence of an extra pair of hands and a calm, safe outlook could mean the difference between a situation which becomes untenable and one which has survived.

All families were followed up immediately after matching and again in 4 - 6 months time. Few complaints were received, and responses to the programme were generally favourable.

EVALUATION

Lack of well controlled scientific research makes the conclusions highly tentative, but it is possible to draw some encouragement from the success of the programme in general terms. The response of the families involved and the waiting list for available grannies does indicate positive feedback in terms of the programme providing some answers to a felt need, but its direct value as an actual preventative to violence is difficult to measure. The skills involved in academic parent effectiveness programmes to help families communicate, resolve complexities, help with discipline and rehabilitation are acquired by experience and can, to some degree at least, be taught. However, such intellectual developments need to be complemented with the experience of informed and sympathetic parenting that does not rely on teaching and administration ("the outside") but coordinates a feeling of peace within the fabric of a caring community ("the inside").

Most of the Benefits involved in Dial-A-Granny are difficult to chart, but they do add up in terms of affection and fulfilment for those concerned. There is a preventative role, too, in the fact that, through increasing self-worth and happiness, there is less necessity for anxiety-relieving escapes like G.P. visits and anti-depressive tablets, as well as fewer visits from domiciliary care, with the sharing of meals. The elderly become participants again and the children have greater love and security, and this is the basis on which they must build their own and, in time, their own children's lives. The children also derive an intuitive knowledge of the degenerative effects of ageing. In a culture where death is a bogeyman instead of a shared inevitability, the

fact of mortality may not be such a shock to those children when they are grown.

Proxy grandparents can also play a role in keeping a weary family in balance rather than placing the children out in disrupting care, making them feel guilty and unwanted. During the programme, praise was received from schools, where students showed marked improvement and Police Officers, who now saw new found fishing companions for bored lads who could have ended up in custodial care at \$41,000 a year.

The results can't be measured, but they are there. The idea received praise from a wide range of people in the community and positive feedbacks showed benefits derived with multiple spin offs for society as a whole.

PROBLEMS

1. The most important point to remember is that success partly depends on appropriate referrals — a challenge, however, which is inherent in all human relationship services.
2. The physical problems are felt in that it is:
 - a. a limited and voluntary pilot project. The service was overwhelmed when demands increased at an exciting rate. For one person to interview, receive and process applications on weekend afternoons, it was a marathon. We interviewed 5 - 8 families a day, Saturday being less busy at first because of sporting activities.
 - b. We are based at the Unley Senior Citizens Club, but the service itself is decentralised and many referrals come from young families in the northern districts. Public transport was troublesome sometimes, and to offset this home visits were occasionally necessary.
 - c. Costs — Office space was provided by the Unley Council, who also paid to have the service registered as a non-profit business. Other costs (mainly postage and telephone) were met by the author.
 - d. The project is ongoing, even once families have been matched, as there is a fair amount of correspondence and applicants' circumstances need continual evaluation on the

card index. This labour is voluntary

PERSONAL PROBLEMS

A few families declined to follow up interviews and a few of the aged felt that they had already done their share, preferring other activities.

The interviews were an attempt on our part to gauge the probability of difficulties by observing the interaction of immature, offensive or evasive people. For the most part, families understood the elderly wanting to be included in their activities. They were careful not to offend distant grandparents or to question too much or too little, simply to provide a means of keeping the families together by strengthening the basic unit.

There were a few predictable problems in that some people believed the service would provide money (these were screened out at the initial interview, obviously), whilst others abused the baby-sitting privilege or embarrassed the grandparents with marital fights or arguments over discipline.

There were a few over-eager grandparents too, who went overboard and bought expensive presents. In the end, we turned away 1.5 per cent of the applicants who had misconceptions or unrealistic expectations, or were unsuitable for the service.

To locate and motivate lonely people, immobilised by self-doubt or young, linguistically isolated families requires much outreach, patience and manpower, but none of these problems seem insurmountable, and we are learning together.

OTHER RELATED POINTS

1. It has an application in the field of the care of the handicapped.
2. It can be useful in times of hospitalisation.
3. It is useful for setting up patterns of nurturance. The fact that opportunities for knowledge of and partial participation in a nurturing role prior to actual parenting are limited has widespread ramifications in terms of human loss and understanding. Services similar to Dial-A-Granny can do much in terms of preventative action here.
4. There are possibilities in the field of migrant assimilation.