Cottage Parents

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Community Services Victoria (CSV) is assessing the skill requirements of effective practice in its client contact workforce through the Skills Enhancement Project. Staff and clients were asked to identify the skill elements of good practice. This material was then converted into draft competency statements which were validated by other staff groups. Finally, the material was placed in questionnaire format and over 4,600 staff were surveyed about the skills involved in effective client work.
***Children Australia** will progressively reproduce a number of the Project's effective practice write-ups and report on conclusions arising from the Project. Further information is available from Bob Burgell at CSV. Telephone (03) 412 7140.*

This effective practice profile traces the progress of sixteen year old Susan, during her stay at the Temporary Emergency Care Unit (TECU) in Outer East Region. The TECU provides temporary accommodation for children and young people while long-term arrangements are made. It is managed by Pauline, a cottage parent who 'lives in' with her own family. This is a new type of service – the skills identified here also apply to cottage parents working in family group homes.

The following should be read in conjunction with the cottage parent effective practitioners' workshop and client interview materials. It is presented to stimulate discussion on the skills, knowledge and values a cottage parent needs to be effective.

The client

Susan was fifteen when she arrived at the cottage. Since the age of eleven, when she was admitted to wardship, she had been through a number of placements, all of which ended because of her behaviour. She came from a broken home, suffering parental neglect and possible sexual abuse by her stepfather.

The cottage parent

Pauline has seventeen years experience in residential child care. Two years ago, she transferred from her section manager's job at Allambie Reception Centre to work in a cottage-based setting.

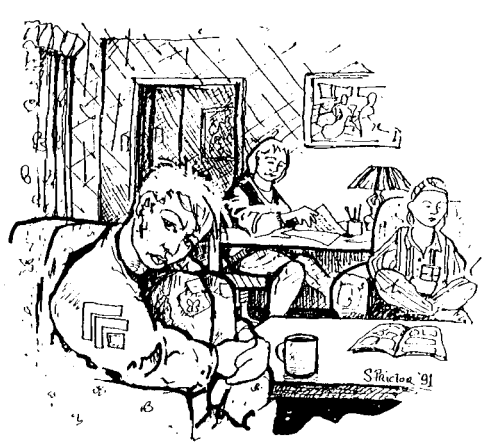
The first meeting

Susan's previous placement was a disaster and so Pauline was asked at short notice to provide a few days care. She was described as rebellious, abusive, a chronic liar and very hard to manage. Pauline kept an open mind to avoid forming judgements – she felt that 'each placement gets a different reaction'.

Susan appeared in a knee length army coat, saying 'I wear this everywhere I go and I never take it off, so don't try and make me'. She'd spent the last two nights on the streets and was 'filthy and pale'.

As soon as they were alone, Susan withdrew to a corner and flopped into a chair, where she stayed for some hours. Pauline made her something to eat, but didn't try to interact with her.

> My first impressions were that this kid just wanted to be left alone. I decided to give her lots of space for the first day or so and try to work out where she was coming from. That night at tea, I noticed she was relaxed with the other kids and had a huge appetite.



What are the rules?

A few days later, Susan said to Pauline, 'All these places have rules, what are yours?' Her voice and manner conveyed indifference. Pauline was tempted to set out the rules, but sensed an approach which relied on restrictions wouldn't work, because of Susan's anti-authority attitude and lack of concern for consequences.

Pauline noticed that Susan enjoyed having regular meals and a place to stay. She decided to use a negotiation approach to involve Susan in decisions which affected her. They reached an arrangement where Susan could 'hang around the house' during her stay, without structured activities, as long as she didn't disrupt others. They also agreed that Pauline should know where Susan was at all times and who she was with if she went out.

At first, Susan was unsure about these boundaries and asked Pauline several times to clarify minor points. Pauline remained patient and reinforced the message that the nature of their relationship would be determined by Susan's commitment to their agreement. Susan responded enthusiastically to the lack of formal structure and her new sense of responsibility; she began doing more to help out than was expected.

Longer than planned

An alternative placement for Susan was difficult to find, so it was decided to allow her to stay on with Pauline. Pauline asked Susan to think about what would have to change. Over the next week or so, Susan began to ask questions: 'how late can I stay out at night?'; 'what about going to visit friends or having boyfriends over?'.

Pauline approached each one flexibly and worked with Susan to sort out what was reasonable from both points of

view. Pauline pushed the need for honesty and earning trust. She pointed out the effect on the other kids, who were all younger, if Susan was allowed to do something that they weren't.

> Like a lot of young people, Susan was a very good negotiator who had lots of ways of getting what she wanted. Pinning her down to specifics and getting her agreement about consequences was the difficult and time consuming part.

The importance of acceptance

About two weeks after she arrived, Susan came home with her neck covered in 'love bites', which she flaunted to get a reaction. Pauline knew her response was critical and withdrew to decide on an approach. When they were clearing up together that night, Pauline said, 'have them if you want, but why not cover them up. Think about how it makes you look.'

Pauline wanted to get a dialogue going, without moralising or telling Susan what to do. It seemed to work – rather than reacting negatively, Susan wanted to know what Pauline meant, which opened up a discussion on appearance.

A few days later, Pauline went into the TV room to find Susan and her boyfriend 'hotly pashing on the couch'. This time, her response was spontaneous and natural: 'get off each other, I want to watch TV'.

Pauline waited for Susan to raise this incident for discussion, which she did the next morning after the others had left. Susan was expecting a blast of disapproval.

Pauline used the same low-key approach as before and suggested Susan could think about some of the things involved in relationships, like safe sex. Susan responded positively to the approach, which allowed Pauline to introduce a new rule informally: 'No heavy petting in front of younger kids'.

The value of humour

Shortly after the above incident, Susan was going out to meet a new boyfriend. She came out of her room, 'covered in heavy make up that was all over the place.' Pauline viewed the new boyfriend as a positive influence and was concerned that the image Susan presented would attract trouble. By exaggerating the image Susan presented, Pauline got her laughing and Susan asked for help in fixing her make up.

Susan's needs emerge

As Pauline anticipated, Susan began to seek affection and attention.

> I felt the only way to manage Susan's behaviour was to relate to her on a personal level. I was aware that if I succeeded she would want a lot of attention.

It started slowly. Susan began to cuddle Pauline. When shopping, Susan wanted Pauline's decision on what new clothes she should buy. Pauline did not want this role and held out for Susan to make her own choices, while she provided advice.

Susan appeared to want Pauline to judge her mother and the ways in which she'd failed her. Pauline avoided criticism and offered neutral support. She was concerned about the significance of Susan's moods changes when she thought about her mother.

Testing out

Susan met a group of young people at the local train station and became involved in a fight. The Police took her to the police station; Pauline was called and agreed to pick Susan up. Susan had been drinking heavily and was abusive and defiant. Pauline's priority was to defuse the situation, which she did by not reacting and expressing concern for how Susan might be feeling. Eventually, Susan calmed down and Pauline got her to bed.

The next day, Susan expected to be kicked out of the cottage. Once it was clarified she was not going to be, she 'visibly relaxed'. Pauline confronted Susan on breaking the rules, which Susan tolerated 'because she understood the boundaries of the situation' – she wasn't going to be moved. They worked out a series of consequences together.

Pauline felt that Susan's behaviour was largely a test of her commitment – seeing what would happen if she behaved badly. Pauline wasn't surprised when over the next weeks Susan became more affectionate and began wanting cuddles regularly. She also began asking Paula, the Unit assistant, for details on her marriage, including personal problems and the way they worked them out together. It was apparent that Susan was curious about how 'healthy' adult relationships worked.

Too good to be true?

Pauline was delighted with the way Susan settled back in. She showed commitment to their arrangements – for example, Susan phoned to advise when she would be late home. Susan started receiving heaps of praise from everyone involved with her. Her appearance changed, and she was now paying attention to hygiene and dress – she even took her army coat to a Salvo bin!

This is too hard for me

Susan's hunger for affection continued to grow. She called Pauline 'mum' more often. Pauline worked at putting realistic parameters around Susan's needs.

A significant development occurred that affected Susan deeply – her mother stopped all contact for no apparent reason. Susan became very moody and withdrew from Pauline. She seemed desperate to find positive things to say about her mother. Pauline offered opportunities to talk and encouraged Susan to discuss things with her worker.

One afternoon, Susan left the house to visit a friend and went missing for three days. She came back exhausted, dirty and withdrawn. Pauline withdrew all privileges and over the next few days tried in a non-intrusive way to discuss with Susan what had motivated her disappearance. Pauline was aware Susan was angry and despondent that her own family couldn't (or wouldn't) care for her.

Before Susan had time to settle, her grandmother became ill and was hospitalised. Susan and her grandmother were very close. Shortly after hearing this, Susan went for a short outing and met three older males drinking beer at the train station. She went back to their place and all four later returned to the cottage for Susan's things. They stole personal property belonging to Pauline and left. Susan was eventually located and is now in other accommodation, while efforts are under way to help her sort out her future direction.

What to do if she returns

'I'd like her to return', Pauline said. Given her background, it's hardly surprising that she acted out as she did. I'll do my best to give her a supportive home with firm boundaries.'

Reflections on working with Susan

Kids like Susan have not had the opportunities to learn how to handle crisis. Her response is to act out by rebelling. Constructive input, some control and heaps of support and understanding while they learn are vital.

I know not to get too emotionally close to kids we care for but with Susan that was hard. The strategies I used to manage her behaviour meant we discussed things on a one-to-one basis and we got close. I was certain she could work through her problems and get on with life—the next year or two are critical for her.'

The ability to keep a clear perspective and be aware of your own feelings is critical. I'll keep on offering emotional support and assistance, but I'll be more aware in future.'

'I was happy with how I handled Susan overall — we can't control every aspect of their lives.'

Community Services Victoria - Skills Enhancement Project

Cottage Parent - Family Group Home Workshop

In August 1991, an effective practitioner workshop took place in a family group home in Outer East Region. Experienced cottage parents were asked about the skills, knowledge and values needed to do the job well. Their responses appear below. A family group home provides between six months and two year's accommodation for children and young people and is managed by a cottage parent, who lives in with their own family. The following reflects only those areas covered in the workshop and is presented to stimulate discussion.

What do you need to be an effective cottage parent?

It is critical to be organised, because running a cottage is a one-person show. Below are some pointers we find helpful.

* Forward planning - preparing for forthcoming events; keeping an accurate diary.
* Getting a routine in place. For example, setting out the child's clothes the night before.
* Having a range of problem-solving strategies worked out in advance.
* Being flexible enough to adapt to changes in arrangements. For example, if a child should become sick and you haven't planned on spending the day caring for them.
* A high degree of personal motivation and a strong work ethic is also essential.

What are the advantages in being well organised?

It helps keep stress levels down, by avoiding unnecessary hassles. If we are feeling on top of the basic tasks in running a house full of people, we can give more to the child. They know when we are not well organised and sometimes they try and take advantage. Many of our children come from really chaotic environments, so *modelling* organisation helps them learn skills they can apply elsewhere.

Which challenges stand out as most important?

Getting the balance between running the house and setting the right environment for the child - a place where they feel comfortable and can get on with their lives. We set the environment by our own personal style and approach to the job.

The following skills and attributes are essential:

* Having a clear sense of our role - we're there to look after the children and provide them with a good home. Their workers are there to focus on problems.
* Being warm and approachable - children need to know they can talk to you and that you recognise them as individuals.

* Letting them know what's expected, so they know where they stand. Once children know they can't get away with things, they usually settle in and accept the rules. Consistency is also very important – everyone must be treated the same.
* Once you've got control, you can afford to be flexible. This is important, as the child likes to feel they are in a normal home, where the rules can be bent a little now and then. They call it *being fair*. It's also an excellent way to reinforce good behaviour.
* Relating to them as individuals is important – like making an extra effort to see their work at school or taking them to sport. Having individual rapport can help overcome many problems.
* Dealing constructively with individual problems the child presents without overreacting. The best way is with a firm but caring approach, on a one-to-one basis.

Do these approaches work for all children?

The above are basic ground rules for dealing with all children. Some present more difficult behaviour, like manipulation. This is best managed by:

* showing them you know what they are up to;
* not rewarding their behaviour with excessive attention;
* establishing common ground rules with other people who are involved with the child – especially parents, case workers and their friend's parents;
* confronting them to clarify the facts and where appropriate being seen to check them; and
* using a range of responses for unacceptable behaviour and rewarding good behaviour.

Once you have the above in place, open up dialogue with them to try and establish their motivation. Impress on them that there are other ways of functioning.

Do you use programs to manage children's behaviour?

It varies with the child and the problem they are presenting. With some problems like bed-wetting, programs can be useful.

These are some of the things we consider:

* Involve the child in designing the program. They will need to first acknowledge that there is a problem and own some responsibility for finding a solution.
* Concentrate on the immediate issues and don't get caught up in issues that may be behind the problem.
* Do your own assessment – children will react differently in each placement.
* Identifying and interrupting the pattern of behaviour.
* Avoid embarrassing the child, treat the problem in a matter of fact way, be discrete and reinforce their positive aspects.
* Help to keep the child's stress levels down.

How do you deal with the children's parents?

* Remain neutral at all times. It is very easy to get caught in the middle.
* Once our role is clarified and respected, we can be warm and supportive towards parents. It is very important for the child to know that parents are welcome.
* Working together with parents; explaining how we handle various issues.

What is the most significant personal challenge?

Managing our own energies. At times the job can be very tiring, like when you have a sick child to look after, you aren't getting enough sleep and one of the other children is acting out or having a crisis. It's times like that when you need a support system – a good supervisor has a critical role to play. Fortunately, our partners are supportive.

What values are important in your work?

* Being able to accept and care for a child, warts and all.
* The ability to work effectively with parents you may not like, or even feel physically safe with.
* Patience and an understanding of what children have been through.
* A firm belief in the value of what you are doing and the importance of a good environment to a child's development.
* Commitment and the ability to hang in there.

What knowledge do you need to be effective?

* Common sense is the most important form of knowledge.
* Practical know-how about handling children.
* An understanding of the phases children go through as they grow up.
* An understanding of what is *normal* behaviour.
* Good communication and negotiation techniques.

How important is the relationship between cottage parents and SOC workers?

We have very different jobs to do for the same children, so getting the ground rules clear is essential. We share information, support each other's efforts and work together where appropriate.

Community Services Victoria - Skills Enhancement Project

The Effective Cottage Parent - Clients' Viewpoints

To understand what skills, knowledge and values a cottage parent requires to be effective, the Skills Enhancement Project talked with clients in a family group home.
The children interviewed are siblings aged sixteen, thirteen and ten and have been in family group homes for eight years. Standard questions provided a general structure and the children were encouraged to talk about the things they saw as important. Direct quotes have been used.

How many cottage parents have you had?

About eight - it's hard to remember exactly. Most of them have been temporary.

What have you liked about your cottage parents?

Being treated with respect

We like being treated with respect.
We aren't just cottage kids you know - we're good kids like everyone else.
It isn't our fault we are here.

Being able to talk to them

How else are you supposed to get along with them?
Some cottage parents have been easier to talk to.
I needed someone to talk to - Cindy has been great.
The ones who listen to us have been good.

Knowing what the rules are

You have to be told what is expected, so you know.
The rules should be fair. We shouldn't have different rules from our mates, just because we live in a cottage.

Cottage parents having an extended family

It's really good knowing our cottage parent's family - we even visit them at Christmas!

Privacy

I don't want them to talk about me to anyone else - except my worker, that's OK.

Having independence

Some cottage parents gave us independence to make a lot of our own decisions.
I'm sixteen and I like being able to cook my own meals.

What would you like to change?

Staying longer

It's very hard to keep getting (emotionally) close to them when they leave all the time. I'll bet they wonder what's wrong with us, because we don't make an effort any more.

Passing on information

Cottage parents need to pass on information to the Department to get things done for us.

Better clothes

You can always tell who are cottage kids because they have cheap clothes. Sometimes we've felt like beggars.

Not being trusted by new cottage parents

It gives me the shits, the way they don't trust us when they first move in. Just because we are cottage kids, doesn't mean we're bad.

Not having to do most of the housework

Why should us kids have to do so much housework - that's what they employ them for.

Not putting their own kids first

It isn't fair.
They shouldn't compare us to their own kids.

How would you change things?

More talking would help

Talking about problems, not just disciplining us.
Talking to us about good things too.

Not threatening us

Every time I was bad, one cottage parent threatened to send me to Baltara. Sometimes, I didn't want to come back from school but she (his sister) made me.

More enthusiastic cottage parents

They should pick ones who can get on with kids and will make us part of their family.

Clarify housework expectation

Because I'm a girl and the eldest, a lot of cottage mums expected me to do most of the housework. I don't mind doing some. My brother is thirteen and he can't cook anything.

Involve kids in selecting cottage parents

We'd like to meet them before they come to live here and say if we like them!
It's our house you know, not theirs - the Government bought it for us.

Summary

What makes an ideal cottage parent?

One who makes us feel happy and cares about us. One we can talk to who doesn't assume things about us, just because we don't have our own parents any more. One who works through problems and doesn't get mad or yell at us. One who isn't rigid and uptight. Someone we can trust who will be here for a long time. One who will help us and likes to do things with us.