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Young people in secure accommodation: self-regulation through community of philosophical inquiry

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In this presentation we will report on a ten-week project that used Community of Philosophical Inquiry (CoPI) with young people aged between fourteen and seventeen in secure accommodation (locked provision). The project examined CoPI as a potentially supportive and challenging activity that might enhance the self-regulation of young people in secure care.

Interventions within secure accommodation tend to focus on creating a positive living environment using, for example, prosocial modelling, behaviour modification, life space intervention and opportunity led work (Smith, 2005). Part of the problem in selecting a specific intervention is in prioritising the behaviour or problem to be targeted. Children in secure care are among the most damaged and vulnerable in society and many have experienced highly stressful and chaotic family circumstances. For Duckworth et al 'Self-regulation thus becomes a potential key, not only to academic attainment, but also to issues around behaviour and discipline' (2009, p. 22).

Children in secure care are often likely to have poor self-regulation and might find interventions aimed at improving self-regulatory skills particularly beneficial. This study focussed on using CoPI as a way of developing self-regulatory strength. Encouraging extremely vulnerable young people to argue can seem counter intuitive. However, the process of arguing requires judgements and control over feelings, especially when participants are frustrated, excited or angry.

We proposed that increasing children's ability to follow the rules will strengthen self-regulation and be beneficial in helping them cope with real life situations within and outside secure settings. Learning to argue will also help to reduce the risk of conflictual situations escalating out of control. Therefore, arguing is a self-regulatory resource that might promote adaptive behaviours and reduce aggressive behaviour. Examining the adherence to, or breaking of, CoPI rules provides an insight into the existence and development of young people's self-regulatory skills in secure accommodation.

Following analysis of recorded dialogues and interviews with staff and the young people, three main themes emerged from the study: issues relating to the dialogue; the lived experiences of the young people; and the structures involved in and surrounding the sessions. The presentation will address each of these themes. We will conclude by sharing findings that suggest the young people were able to self-regulate during the sessions and that the structure of CoPI appears to have supported this. Further, the young people engaged with the process and were able to regulate their often volatile behaviour to work with others without the session deteriorating. The young people clearly identified with the group. It appears, therefore, that there is something in the structure of the practice that encourages the young people to self-regulate in a manner that does not seem to be evident at other times in the Centre. We will also share lessons learned from the project in relation to working with young people in secure accommodation.