The symbolic use of food and food practices in residential child care

Dr Ruth Emond (hre1@stir.ac.uk)
Building a Community of Practice
June 23rd 2016
Inspired by Lake George

Nobody sees a flower - really - it is so small it takes time - we haven't time - and to see takes time ...

Georgia O’Keefe
Underpinning theoretical principles

– The power of the ‘everyday’ in residential and foster care (Smith, 2009)

– Everyday meanings of food beyond nutrition (Punch et al. 2010)

– A symbolic medium through which relationships are played out

– Complexity of residential/foster life (past, present and future colliding) (Redl and Wineman 1951)
FOOD AND CARE STUDY

– Basis for this workshop
– Study undertaken by University of Stirling into food practices in three residential children’s homes in Scotland
– Lots of interest from staff and from foster carers about the findings
– *Resource Handbook*, children’s leaflet and academic journal articles but no ‘how to’ tools
Research Aims

- Power and Resistance
- Social organisation
- Symbolic
- Dynamic
- Identity and Difference
- Interactions within and between the generational groups
- Care and Control

Meaning Contexts

Food Practices

Social Structures
THINKING ABOUT CAKE

• Many meanings
  – a treat/relaxation
  – pleasure/escape/guilt
  – building relationships
  – learning and participation
  – as recognition – preferences
  – makes you sad/feel excluded
  – celebrates success/reward
  – power: control/bargain/sanction vs refusal
  – gets you noticed/creates time
  – provides predictability
  – …?
FINDINGS: FOUR MAIN AREAS

– Food in the residential/foster care context
– Managing food routines
– Food, feelings and relationships
– Food tensions within residential/foster care
FOOD AND CARE

Creating a home
- Rights
- Responsibilities
- Autonomy and equality

Structure and routines
- Socialisation
- Normalising
- Fun & enjoyment
- Togetherness
- Predictability & order
- Safety
- Equipping children for the future
- Rythms
- Food as a care work medium

Care and control
- Demonstrating effort
- Protection
- Empowerment
- Boundaries
- Value & worth

Relationships
- Keeping somebody in mind
- Sustaining
- Trust

Transitions
- Into care
- Arriving
- Connecting
- Orienting
- School/home
- Leaving care

Recovery
- Nutrition
- Nurture
- Self-esteem
- Conflict
- Repair

Testing & sustaining
- Getting to know each other
- Feelings
- Respect
FOOD ROUTINES IN RESIDENTIAL CARE: A JUGGLING ACT

Three key tensions

Being at work
- It is the staff’s workplace
- Measurable indicators of care
- Fixed mealtimes for shift planning.
- Mealtimes and cooking with children provide structured, educational tasks.
- Mealtimes can be work-time for both staff and children

Creating a ‘home’
- Paying attention to children’s food preferences, and accommodating them
- Providing home cooked meals
- Regular mealtimes around the table
- Mealtime conversations as a group
- Changes in food routines to mark different times of the day, week or year. E.g. brunch, a TV dinner

Managing ‘institutional’ constraints
- Rules and regulations limit choices, e.g. rights to safety and health can conflict with giving open access to food
- Or menu choices exceed those of a ‘normal’ home.
- The regulation of uses of time and space; a level of inflexibility
- Eating within a group of ‘strangers’; the difficulty to obtain space and privacy.
Common responses to ‘trauma’

- Confusion
- Regression
- Sense of powerlessness
- Denial
- Intrusive memories
- Developmental derailment (Winnicott 1963)
- Projection of ‘intolerable, unspeakable and unthinkable feelings into another person who is prepared to receive and listen to them (Lanyado 2009)
Erosion of sense of self

- Body boundary not known or respected
- Messages from perpetrator
- Messages post disclosure
- ‘normal’ / ‘abnormal’
- Identity as victim
Food as vehicle to ‘Recovery’ from Trauma

• **Experiencing acceptance** – food choices and practices (behaviour as function)

• **Controlling the pace** – joining the table, eating with others, sharing knowledge and taste

• **The ‘ground has stopped shaking’** – routine and rhythms around food (‘punctuation points’ – predictable and reliable)

• **Having choice over the medium of expression** – food as distraction, shared activity, sensory

• **Conscious and unconscious processes noticed and contained** – food as a means of regression and denial
Belonging and Self

‘... our sense of self is constructed in a relational process in our interactions with other people as well as in relation to more abstract notions of collectively held social norms, values and customs’ (May 2011:368)

Our sense of knowing the world and our place within it is sensory; it is through smells, touch, sounds and movement through space and time that the world becomes familiar and starts to feel like ‘ours’ (cfe O’Neill 2001, Friedmann 2002)
The story of Ben and Judy

• Belonging – to past and present

• Sense of self – food as identity, testing and experimenting with ‘new’ selves.
Placement in Looked After Care

• Out of danger
• See ‘what could be’ rather than ‘just what is’ (May 2009)
• New rules, routines and rhythms
• New tastes, smells and rituals
• New symbolism
• New relationships
FOOD, FEELINGS AND RELATIONSHIPS

ADULTS AND CHILDREN:

– Managerialist/procedural culture
– Relationships are messy and painful
– Means of building and testing relationships
– Links to recovery
– Food as a safe ‘carrier of love’
– Food as a way of expressing and repressing feelings
– I know you well/we are connected
IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

– Moving beyond nutrition vs pressure for physical health
– Window to the culture as well as the individual
– Food as ‘therapy’/recovery
– Link to ethos and aims of the service
– The power of the everyday
RESOURCES FOR FOOD-BASED PRACTICE

– *Reflective Workshop*: raising awareness (also an *Interactive Introduction* – online)

– *Reflective Tool*: to think about the child you are looking after

– *JOTIT Notebook*: for capturing reflections about food issues as they occur

– *Peer Support*: using a specific group or staff meetings to explore these ideas and to think about intervention
Using the Resources

Interactive Introduction

Reflective Workshop

Reflective Tool

Peer Support

JOTIT Notebook

Peer Support

Reflective Tool
The power of the everyday

Just as ripples spread out when a single pebble is dropped into water, the actions of individuals can have far-reaching effects

Dalai Lama
Food for Thought

We would love to hear your views and experiences of using the resources

– Ruth Emond – h.r.emond@stir.ac.uk
– Samantha Punch – s.v.punch@stir.ac.uk
– Ian McIntosh – ian.mcintosh@stir.ac.uk

www.foodforthoughtproject.info