

Working with Children of Alcoholics

THOMAS LINDSTEIN: WORKING WITH CHILDREN OF ALCOHOLICS.

Stockholm Studies in Social Work, 10. Stockholm University. 1996, 261 pp.

● In 1990, the people at Ersta Vändpunkten (run by Ersta Diakonisällskap, a deaconal institution within the church of Sweden working with social welfare, health care, and education in Stockholm) had a good idea. They contacted the Department of Social Work at Stockholm University to carry out a research-based evaluation of their work with children of alcoholics. Psychologist Thomas Lindstein said yes to the task, and the first result of this collaboration is now available in the form of the book *Working with Children of Alcoholics*.

It is a very interesting book on a difficult topic. In essence, the book is the first part of a larger evaluation project of all the work done with children of alcoholics at Ersta. Since 1989, Ersta Vändpunkten has offered structured group work for children of alcoholics. This work is inspired by the American programme, Children Are People Too, which is based on the Minnesota model. The American model has been reworked and adapted to Swedish conditions. In this way, Lindstein was attached to the project at an early stage.

Ersta offers groups for younger children (in the 6-8 age group), slightly older children (9-12 years) and youths (13-17 years). Each of the groups meets, under the leadership of a trained group leader and an assistant, 15 times over 15 consecutive weeks, and follows a predetermined programme. Ersta has four basic principles for this work: (1) to change hopelessness into hope, and to get children to realize their limitations with regard to affecting their parents' alcohol addiction; (2) to have children openly share their experiences. This means increasing the children's awareness of themselves and of others, and breaking the concealment of alcohol addiction; (3) to introduce a rhythm, regularity and structure via the programme, as a counterbalance to everyday life in an alcoholic family; and (4) to support the children in recognizing their own rights and personal limitations, again in understanding of the fact that this can be a problem for children of alcoholics.

These four principles are converted into a programme for the 15 meetings, such that

there is a fixed course for each individual group which takes the children's age into consideration. The book is based on participant observation over 15 weeks in a group of 6-8 year-old children. Lindstein also had access to the group leader's journal after the group meetings, and to the group leader's and assistant's oral evaluation after the group session.

In terms of research, the aim was initially to carry out a phenomenological analysis of Ersta's working methods and approach to the task, and also to conduct a descriptive study of how the children in the group benefit under the basic principles of Ersta Vändpunkten's work. A follow-up study based on interviews is planned for the future.

The study in this book is purely phenomenological and descriptive. I think this is a good idea. It is especially important in evaluation research for time to be spent on the descriptive angle. And descriptive writing has a particularly original communication value when it deals with a field which has had relatively little coverage, such as that of group work with children of alcoholics.

There are five chapters which describe in detail what happened in the 15 sessions in which the group was followed. The content of the sessions (which follows the programme) is gone through, and there is also a detailed description of what happened for each child. The reflections of the group leaders are then dis-

cussed.

When one has worked with children's groups (as I have), this kind of descriptive work arouses a great joy of recognition. One can recognise the ups and downs, the problems and the enthusiasm from one's own work, and I am pleased to see it described in such detail. For those who have not yet had this experience of working with children in groups, and who want to, I believe there is enough material in this book which can be used to build up one's own practice. In this way, the description has the value of being original.

Theoretical assessment is made in appraisals of every 3-4 sessions. Piaget's developmental psychology is used as the background here. This is logical enough, really, when one thinks of the cognitive approach used in the programme. The programme for the individual sessions is evaluated on the basis of Piaget's developmental stages, in order to see whether the children are, formally and logically, sufficiently developed to understand what is being communicated. In some of the sessions which did not go quite as planned, it is shown that the instruction and educational material used has contained a level of abstraction which was above that which could be expected in terms of development, for example. Again, this is logical enough, but it shows good initiative to demonstrate this fact.

The group life and the establishment of a group feeling and

culture are also looked into. Here, Lindstein writes on the basis of his own considerations, starting with prevalent theory. He uses concepts such as dependent culture, fight and flight culture, pairing culture and symbiotic culture, and gives a description of the group's development from a dependent culture to an oppositional culture, amongst other things. It is particularly important to be aware of these things when working with children's groups. Even small children have an obvious group culture, and I am pleased that Lindstein emphasizes this, also with respect to the communicative value. It is meaningful to describe the group's development in this way.

The two levels of analysis mentioned above are general. In addition to this, the progress of each child is followed in an ongoing descriptive analysis which evaluates the child's development/change throughout the group process, and whether (and to what extent) the aims formulated in Ersta Vändpunkten's programme have been realized for each child. A comprehensive and meticulous piece of work, although there are periods in which it can be a little difficult for the reader to see things in the broader perspective.

Lindstein's conclusion is that the programme works. Something positive happens to the children, and they learn a large number of the things which are formulated in the founding principles. There are, however,

a few places where revisions to the material used are recommended, so that it better matches the children's level of development.

Lindstein acknowledges that he is not neutral in his outlook. He has always found Ersta's work exciting. There is therefore more enthusiasm than criticism in his analyses. Nor is this reviewer neutral. I also find Ersta's work exciting. I also have a commitment to these children. It is incredibly important for meaningful, serious programmes to be set up for children of alcoholics. I am, therefore, pleased that a research-based evaluation of an important activity in this field has now been carried out, and I find it to be a good, professional piece of work.

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