

8 rules for working in a children's home



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Here are 8 simple rules
which will help you
to become a great
residential care worker
in a children's home



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1

You must like the children

If you work in a children's home and don't like the children who live there, then stop now. The single most important thing that you can do for the child in front of you is to like them. If it is hard for you, then try to find a small part of the child's personality and like this. Over time, it will grow and you will find yourself wondering why you found liking them difficult in the first place.

Don't pretend to like them, that is disrespectful to both of you. Some of the children who live in residential care are experts at spotting adults who are false, and they don't trust them. Others are more vulnerable, desperate for affection, and those children will believe you when you say you care. It would be wrong to take advantage of their vulnerability and their need for others to care. So, be honest in your words and actions, and where possible, tell the child the specific reason(s) you like them and don't resort to meaningless stock phrases.

The child's experience of being liked by you will form the basis of your relationship and help you both as you get to know each other. It is fundamental for their mental health that you do this. It is not an optional extra, it is the opposite, it is the basis for everything else. Being liked by another person allows them to believe that they are likeable, and worthy of affection. This is vital for their future well-being and relationships with others. If you can't like the children you are looking after, then leave the profession.



2

Choose where you work carefully

Not all children's services are the same. Some are very good and some are very bad. As a new residential care worker, the environment you work in is likely to have a bigger impact upon you, than you upon it. Therefore, you must do your homework on the organisation and its senior personnel, and decide if this is who you'd like to work with.

When you start, it is hard to tell good and poor organisations apart, and there are no rules about ownership type or size which determine it. You will have to ask lots of questions and form an opinion. When applying to join an organisation, ask to visit the home where you'll be working. Pay attention to the environment to see if there are clues to the standard of care provided to the children. If you can, ask the children what it is like to live here, and ask the staff what it is like to work here. Use all of the information available to decide if you are happy to give your work to this organisation.

It is not fool proof, but my rule of thumb is to only work in a home where the food for the children is plentiful and good. I have decided that if an organisation can't meet a basic need like providing healthy food then it is unlikely to meet the complex needs that looked after children can sometimes have. You may develop your own, value based, rule of thumb as you gain more experience, but if you need to, you can borrow mine until then. The decision of where you work is the first important one you'll make in your career, so, choose wisely.



3

The team is the parent

There is an important difference between looking after children in residential care and doing the same task as a parent or foster parent. The difference is presence. Parents and foster parents are present for most of the time and residential care workers are present for some of the time. Therefore, in residential care, the team is the parent because the team is present most of the time. Contracting and patterns of work usually mean that no one individual can do all the parenting a child needs, if that child is living in residential care.

As a new residential worker, you may misunderstand how your individual role and the role of the team work together to support the child you look after. Common misunderstandings are usually of two types, an over emphasising of either the team role or the individual role to the detriment of the other. Both are wrong.

In the first misunderstanding, you may underplay the importance of your relationship with the child and, for example, think it doesn't matter who attends the child's parent teacher meeting as long as someone from the team goes. For the child, this is likely to be a very important meeting and they should have a voice in choosing who supports them. In the second type of misunderstanding, you may overplay the importance of your relationship with the child and, for example, think that only you know what is in the child's best interests and therefore the opinions of your team colleagues are of less importance when making decisions about this child's care. In this example, decisions about the child's care may become imbalanced over time and vital information held by other team members may be unintentionally overlooked.



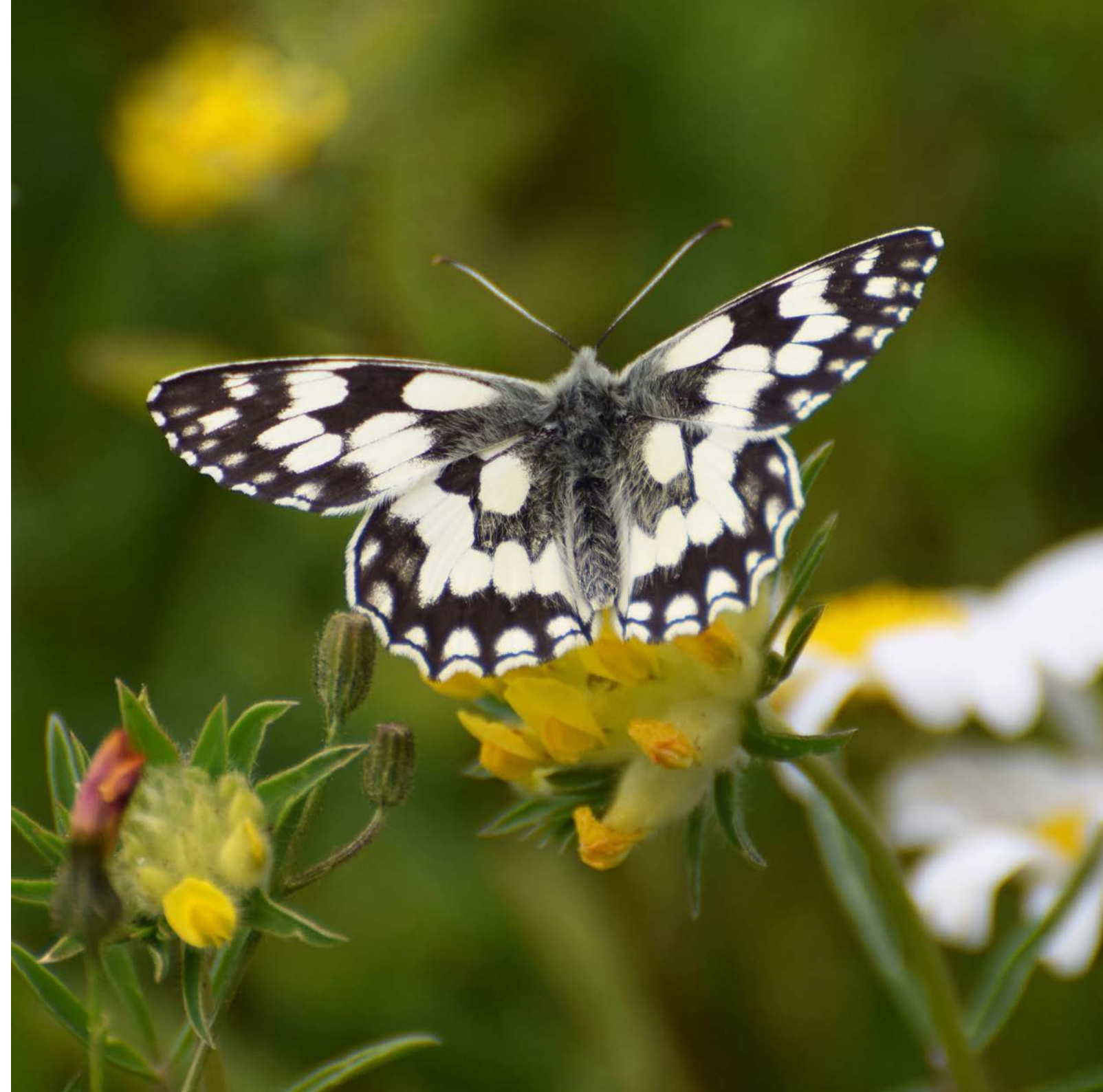
4

Respect each child's individuality

Each child growing up in residential care is an individual. They have a unique set of experiences, and a unique set of emotional responses to those experiences. In your relationship with the child you care for, it is important that you understand this and that you resist the prompting to group them into a category. They are a person worthy of the same respect as every other person and not merely or only a member of a subset of society.

Be wary of using labels, even those used frequently by other professionals, to describe an individual child. When used inappropriately, these labels can be dehumanising and reductive. The disciplines of psychiatry, clinical psychology, psychotherapy and others can provide a theoretical support to you in this work. But don't use their language to categorise the child you are looking after. Instead, use the theory to help you to make sense of your observations and experiences with the child and use it as a support to you, as you gradually get to know them as an individual.

Speak respectfully about the child in all circumstances. If you are called upon to share a view or give an opinion about the child you are looking after, do so without labels or jargon. In doing so, you will influence how other's speak about the child through your words and actions. More than this, your commitment to see them as an individual will reflect core values which are both good and necessary, and which will help you to do your work well. This commitment to respect each child's individuality can act as a 'true north' for you in your career, you can return to it when you get lost.



5

Get to know the child's story

At the most basic level, make it your mission to know the child you are looking after's history. It is vitally important that you seek as much information as possible about the child's life before they came to live in residential care. It is highly likely that their life experiences have become fragmented and that even basic information is not known to you. You may have to go to extraordinary lengths to gather all of the information in one place but it is really important that you do.

Their care file is likely to have a chronology of key events in their life. Read it and try to understand it from the perspective of what it would have been like to be their age and to experience this event. The chronology in the child's file is not the total of their life history, it is, in fact, the barest of skeletons on which you can add more information about the past from the child and others. It may help you to draw it out as a timeline and in doing so see if there are gaps in what is written in the file.

Over time and with their permission, ask the child what they can remember about their family and other important people. Ask them about key events and how they felt. If they agree to share it with you, their recounting of their story will flesh out the chronology and help you to see them fully, and individually. More importantly, it will help the child to make sense of their experiences and to construct a self-narrative of their life so far.



6

Be parental in your words and actions

Every child needs parenting, it is an irreplaceable process that helps a person grow from a dependent infant into an independent adult. In families, the parent's role is to protect, nurture, and teach the child, and then when they are ready for it, to let go. You are in loco parentis and this is now your job with the child you're looking after.

Parenting is not a static set of tasks, every child growing up needs different things from their parents according to their age, stage of development and current circumstances. You have to work out what parenting your child needs now. Together with your colleagues, have a discussion about how the child is when you're around and importantly, what they are like when you're not. Work out your best guess at what they might need from you, and from others. Then put the collective decision about parenting into your words and actions with the child.

What usually follows is a series of trying things, failing, trying new things, nearly getting it right, trying the same old things, feeling like you've cracked it, failing again and trying again. This process carries on and on and on, it is called parenting. The love and commitment shown by the parents in everyday interactions are vital for the health and well-being of the child now, and into adulthood. The child you are looking after needs all of this from you and at points it will be exhausting. I have learned through my career that there are no shortcuts for this process but also, that it is worth it in the end.



7

Survive the first year

The ability to tolerate the physical and emotional demands of working in a children's home is a superpower. You have the opportunity to change lives but to do so you must survive. As a new worker, it is likely that the demands of your new role will be, at times, overwhelming and that you will feel like you can't carry on. What is most important is that you find the support you need to keep going. Survival in the work is the first of many tests that you'll face in your career in children's services, but in many ways, it is the most important one. The child you look after may have had many caring adults disappear from their lives, you must do all that you can not to join the list of the missing.

The physical demands of your work in residential care are considerable. The children will have lots of energy and want to do things. Hopefully, you will find ways to expend energy enjoyably together. There will also be a lot of physical care and care for the environment which will be part of the job. It will be very difficult to do your job well without good enough rest and recuperation outside of work. It is important that you find a balance which is healthy for you and allows you to do your job well.

The emotional demands of your work will be considerable, if you are doing your job well. You have to be thin skinned enough to allow the children to emotionally impact you and resilient enough to deal with the consequences. Talking about your work with colleagues and your supervisor is the best way to make sense of the emotional impact. Doing so, will help make sure that you don't bring it home and act it out with your nearest and dearest. This is a real risk and efforts must be taken to avoid falling into this pattern.



8

You must like the children

I told my good friend Paul van Heeswijk that when I wrote an article of this kind that it would begin and end with you must like the children. It is by far the most important rule and it is impossible to help them if you don't.



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