

Children's Views on Restraint: Messages from the Children's Rights Director

A survey of children and young people in residential homes and special schools was carried out by the Children's Rights Director and their views on the use of physical restraint brought together in a recently published report. Children and young people expressed strong views about the use of restraint and clear messages for staff, managers and policy makers. The report is arranged around three main areas: avoiding restraint and preventing a build up to danger level, when and how to use restraint and the impact on those involved.

Avoiding the use of restraint:

Children talked about problems building up and in some circumstances, being exacerbated by staff who allowed shouting matches to develop or were perceived to *'rile you until you want to hit them, then they restrain you'*. Children became angry at perceived unfairness or injustice, or when they felt they was no point complaining. If initial problems were handled better, they felt that this kind of situation could be avoided. Staff need to develop skills in heading off problems before they reach danger point; effective strategies should include staff backing off, rather than engaging in arguments and slanging matches. Instead of persisting in a course of action it would be better to find an alternative way around it and be prepared to listen. The problems that lead to restraint being used are often quite minor and not dangerous; many children reported that it often started with a petty argument, not with violence, which then came as a result of the ensuing build up. When staff were faced with a situation that had got out of control often they didn't know how to handle it and not all were properly trained or practised in using restraint.

The use of restraint by staff often backfires, leading to the young person becoming even more worked up. When asked, children had alternative suggestions; talk me down calmly, offer me a cigarette, let me know you are listening to what I'm trying to say, take me away from the others, into a quieter place. In any event, they thought it was good practice to give someone a chance to calm down before a warning was given that restraint would have to be used.

Each child responds differently and in the end staff need to consider how best to deal with each one individually. One way to anticipate the best way of responding was to use each child's Individual Placement Plan to work out the best way of handling that young person if they lost control, taking their own suggestions into account.

Key Points:

- The build up to the use of restraint often starts with something small or trivial
- If the initial problem is handled well, restraint should not be necessary, think of alternatives
- The Placement Plan for each individual child should describe how best to deal with that child if they do lose control
- Staff who try restraint when they don't know how to can make things even more dangerous for everyone

When to use restraint:

Most children agreed that at times restraint was necessary and they recognised that sometimes they lost control and were likely to injure themselves or others or to do serious damage to property. They saw that staff sometimes had problems in keeping control and that they often had to deal with difficult and very challenging behaviour. Children could often spot vulnerable and less experienced workers and took advantage of this. However, most thought that restraint should only be used as a very last resort if there was genuinely no other way, some thought two young people just fighting or throwing things around didn't always require restraint, as an example one young person was restrained for throwing a newspaper. Staff need to be clearer about when they will or won't use restraint. When asked, children and young people thought it should only be used:

- When they are assaulting someone else
- Had a weapon they were likely to use
- Causing 'serious damage' which they defined as 'really permanent costly damage to property' such as the structure of the building, but not something like breaking a plate, although hitting someone with a plate would be serious
- Children thought the careful use of restraint was more likely to be justified within secure centres as they acknowledged that residents were at higher risk of injuring someone.

Restraint was often felt to be a punishment and should not be used as such. When further reparation was required then it felt like a double punishment and if the police were brought in it could lead to a criminal conviction as well, sometimes for damage to property rather than injuring someone else. However, young people thought that when staff had lost control it was better to call the police rather than carry out restraint wrongly.

Some children had been restrained without warning and had no idea what was going on; they thought they should be told how it would be done and when it might be used and warned in advance. Some had had previous experience of assault as victims of physical or sexual abuse which could lead to them lashing out at any physical contact, but they felt this was not taken into account. The use of restraint was likely to make them more worked up and more out of control. *'Some are in a children's home because of abuse and force and getting restrained is the same.'*

Key Points:

- Children agreed that restraint is sometimes needed, but only when someone is likely to get hurt or property is likely to get seriously damaged
- Staff and children should be clear about when it should or shouldn't be used and what will happen
- Warnings should be given
- It should not be used as a punishment
- Calling the police is usually unnecessary but is a better alternative than inexperienced staff getting it wrong
- Staff need to understand that some people do not like an adult touching or holding them because of past abuse

The Impact of Restraint on Young People:

'It makes you feel like you're nothing. People holding you down brings bad memories, it's horrible.'

The experience of being restrained can have a powerful effect on both the individual child or young person involved and those around them. Children reported feelings of claustrophobia and panic, experiences of physical pain and hurt with hand or bruise marks, humiliation; especially if others were watching and laughing at them; and a sense of injustice or unfairness which could lead to a desire for revenge against the staff. Afterwards some children wanted the chance to talk about it with someone; others wanted to be left alone. A debriefing session when things were calmer would help.

How to do restraint:

Young people felt that restraint should be used to make things safe for everyone and to stop people getting hurt. All staff need to be properly trained and know how to use it safely and it should not be used by untrained and inexperienced staff. Most young people soon learn how to get out of restraint, another reason for proper training. All were in agreement that being restrained should not hurt if done properly and that staff should never kick you. Some children suffer from asthma or epilepsy and staff should be aware of this, the restraint holds should not stop you breathing or involve 'positional asphyxia'.

Some children told of worrying examples of being pushed face down on the floor, held back against someone's knee, being held down or sat on by several adults. Sometimes this could lead to accidental injuries such as carpet burns or broken ribs. They thought the use of restraint should never lead to broken bones; adults should not sit on your head, grab you around the neck or push your arms painfully up your back. Staff also needed to take account of how strong they were, some male staff tended to use far more force than necessary, which carries potential risks when strength and weight are used without special care or skill.

Staff need to know how to disarm someone with a weapon and to remove dangerous objects that were either nearby or that the young person was holding. Using restraint on someone who is holding a potentially dangerous object is likely to make the situation more dangerous. There was agreement that properly used restraint should calm you down not make you angrier, the initial problem could then be talked over and sorted out. Good experience of restraint was summed up as *'therapeutic physical intervention, not old fashioned kicking'*

Key points:

- Restraint should never involve pain or physical injury
- Staff need to be trained in how to restrain without hurting and to take account of their own weight and strength
- Restraint should be used with great care on children with asthma or epilepsy

Following this report the Children's Rights Director is now hoping that the government will issue new guidance to staff working in children's residential settings, which will address the issues that have been highlighted.

Reference:

Children's Views on Restraint: A survey of the views of children and young people in residential homes and residential special schools.

Available on line:

http://www.csci.org.uk/publications/childrens_rights_director_reports/restraint_report.pdf