Home is Where We Start From!

Hully Wolderufael
• All humans need the following for a healthy development of a sense of identity and mental wellbeing
  – Consistency of care: to have a positive, affirmative relationship with the primary carer to foster a sense of safety
  – Continuity/predictability: to have a sense of continuity of care to reduce the sense of anxiety
  – Meaning: to make sense of one’s experience and provide a shared understanding of the world

• A healthy mental wellbeing requires a healthy self-esteem and self-acceptance. Self-esteem could be defined as a knowledge of oneself as:
  – Loveable
  – Acceptable
  – Capable
• The **secure base** is the main care giver that provides the safety and nurture.
• It is the relationship that a child comes back to for affirmation and positive feedback after “exploring” its world.
• It is also the main relationship it would run back to for comfort and safety when in distress or faced by threatening situations.
• The more secure this relationship is with the care giver, the more confident a child grows to be and gain a positive view of oneself.
• This seems to have the cumulative effect of enabling the child to believe that the world in general is a safe place, and that in times of need she/he can ask for help and others will be willing to offer adequate and appropriate support.
• It also informs the child that those who provide such support also derive pleasure from helping or supporting her/him which is one of the foundations of a healthy self esteem and self confidence.
• Values are shared principles or beliefs and usually are there to look after the best interest of the majority. Just as attachment ensures the safety and security of the infant, values and practices within the home provide the social safeguards for belonging and participation within the family and community.

• Values are also the standard by which the child learns to measure behaviour, attitude, and ways of relating to each other. For example, the standard of behaviour expected within the family sets the standard of behaviour that the child displays outside the home. Since children learn from what they observe, there is no point in “do as I tell you not as I do”.

• Therefore one of the main tasks of the primary care giver is to prepare the child for the social world the child needs to live in successfully.

• A foundation in secure attachment, healthy self-esteem and adequate knowledge of shared values sets the child up for a more positive mental wellbeing.
• From the presentations we had so far of those considered to be Troubled Families we have observed that
  – They tend to have had unstable backgrounds which left them unable to provide a stable home environment for their own children (intergenerational challenges)
  – When faced with crises situations, they find it very difficult to ask for help
  – They tend to have missed out on their education and employability skills development
  – Their children display challenging/disruptive behaviour in school and neighbourhoods creating more stress for the whole family
  – They tend to have more incidences of domestic abuse, drug and alcohol dependence and instability in their partner relationships
  – They tend to have more health complications or conditions
  – Though they may not have a diagnosed mental health condition, those who support them notice the inconsistencies that leaves them concerned for their mental welfare
• This is in direct contrast to the situation described at the beginning as essential elements for the promotion of mental wellbeing and healthy self-esteem.

• The unstable backgrounds they come from could indicate the lack of:
  – Consistency of care
  – Predictability and reliability of the capacity of the care giver
  – The lack of preparedness for the social world

• Without gaining a sense of “I am loveable, acceptable and capable” as an infant and a child, the foundation for a healthy self-esteem: starting from self-acceptance, believing others could be trusted and one can make a difference to ones personal circumstances could not be achieved.

• It is also possible that the inconsistency and unpredictability of care and that of the “secure base” would have failed to demonstrate the required shared values that would have allowed them to succeed in the social world e.g. School, neighbourhood, work etc.
• Assuming these are some of the challenges families face with undiagnosed mental health needs the following are some of the recommendations explored in the workshops:
  – Provide services that promote a sense of safety, security and continuity of care. It would take families a while to trust professionals and service providers; however, this would alleviate some of the anxiety and insecurity that comes with trusting others to care and confidence to have ones needs met.
  – Services and key works can provide the secure base to these families: a place for affirmation, validation and recognition of achievement and a refuge to come back to in terms of distress or threats. This should enable service providers to work towards prevention and early intervention rather than crises intervention.
  – Services could prepare families for the social world: key workers and other staff need to embody values service users could aspire to and create opportunities to develop essential social skills through training, placement and volunteering.
• It was also recognised that it was crucial to involve each member of the family in finding their own solution to the challenges they face. This is important to promote a sense of “self-agency”; the building block to develop a belief in oneself.
• The opportunity to take responsibility and implement solutions creates a sense of competence and capability towards building a healthy self-esteem. They do not have to get it right first time, or all the time. That they try should be good enough.
• Service providers and key workers have a role to support family members choose manageable tasks and achievable goals to build their resilience long term through these collaborations as the confidence and thereby the self-esteem of each member gradually improves. As shown above this promotes mental wellbeing.
• Using existing third sector agencies to widen the support networks available to families was identified as crucial in the transition of the members towards more fulfilling inter-dependent relationships where hopefully the cycle of abuse and neglect does not continue to the next generation.