



Case Study: Circle of Support & Accountability (COSA)

Gary

Gary (not his real name) was a 17-year old young man with a diagnosis of global development delay, autism and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder. He had experienced acute neglect and emotional abuse from an early age. As a result of this, he was removed from the care of his biological mother at the age of two and placed with a foster family with whom he remained.

Gary was referred to Respond's forensic service by his school for a risk assessment as a result of his harmful sexual behaviour towards young children. Amongst the recommendations of the risk assessment was the offer of a Circle of Support & Accountability (COSA) for Gary.

The volunteers were made aware of Gary's history and childhood difficulties and understood that it was a priority to ensure that he did not put others at risk. To that end, volunteers were in regular contact with the COSA coordinator and, through her, the professionals also working with Gary; in this case, his headteacher, social worker and psychiatrist.

In the early meetings, the focus of the circle was on everyone getting to know each other and creating a non-judgmental and comfortable working space. The volunteers would offer companionship and help him with his social and emotional needs. It quickly became apparent that Gary communicated best via interactive play and games. The volunteers showed great ingenuity in inventing creative modes of communication. These helped to develop his thinking, talking and listening skills.

In time, the circle was able to speak more openly about sex, relationships and friendships. The volunteers used role playing to help Gary understand feelings and behaviour from the perspective of others. They devised practical strategies to help avoid risky situations.

By the end of the circle (some 18 months later), Gary was able to talk about his harmful sexual behaviour. Professionals working with him reported that his confidence and communication skills had improved immeasurably. His ability to express his feelings and to empathise with others had also developed. He was more socially integrated into his peer group and reported that he better understood the impact of his behaviour on others. Gary felt that the circle had helped him significantly: "I had someone to talk to. It's good because I don't keep it inside me. When it's something sad or something angry, I feel good when I've said it."

To help the core member after the end of the circle, the volunteers developed a toolkit of alternative strategies for managing his thoughts and emotions. This took the form of a visual wall chart for his bedroom in Easy Read. A counting game was devised to help Gary listen and concentrate; over time he engaged in real dialogues. Gary's experience of companionship enabled him to develop the belief that he was worthy of friendship and could attain similar relationships outside the COSA. His mum said, "He felt part of a group rather than the one who was the client... the group setting made talking easier."

Following the end of his circle, Gary was able to access psychotherapy at Respond and he says, "Now, if I got something inside of me I go to my mum or Sue." (his therapist).