

Andy Hillier is the Features Editor of Young People Now, a weekly magazine for youth professionals. This article is taken, with permission, from the website www.ypnmagazine.com on 16th November 2005 and is linked to the Youthful minds website in Stockport (www.youthfulminds.org)

Andy Hillier

Mental health: Fun on their minds

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A project in Stockport is helping young people with mental health problems to take part in regular youth activities. Andy Hillier finds out how it works

Fifteen-year-old Brian would never have dreamed of going to a youth club under normal circumstances. He suffers from a rare condition called body dysmorphia that means he is excessively worried about his appearance and doesn't like going out in public.

"In his mind, he views himself as ugly and deformed," says Laurie Carefoot, development worker at the Sound Minds project in Stockport. "He thinks he's overweight and that everyone's looking at him."

Brian is one of eight young people currently attending Sound Minds, a youth group for 13- to 16-year-olds living in Stockport who are experiencing mental health difficulties.

Equal treatment

Set up last year, the project is run by Stockport Youth Service and is funded through contributions from the community child and adolescent mental health service (CAMHS) programme. The scheme provides young people with the chance to take part in a range of regular youth activities such as outings to theme parks, outdoor education trips, as well as arts and environmental work, music, drama and photography sessions. "They get to do the kind of things other young people do," says Carefoot.

The young people are referred to the project by a variety of professionals including teachers, social workers, mental health workers and GPs. They are then screened by a community CAMHS panel made up of a range of professionals, which decides whether the project is appropriate for the young person or not.

Some of the young people have been diagnosed with clinical conditions, while others have been identified as being at high risk of developing a mental health problem.

"Many of the young people have

conditions such as eating disorders, depression, grief, communication problems, anxiety, behavioural problems and obsessive-compulsive disorders," says Carefoot. "Some have severe problems, but many of them just need a little help."

Before a young person is placed on the programme, a project worker will visit them in their home and explain the situation and what will be involved in the programme. At first, the young people can be quite defensive about taking part. "They know there is a stigma attached to mental health and they see the referral as negative and an indication that something is wrong with them," says Carefoot. "But we try to explain that they are just here to have some fun and this is not counselling or group therapy."

Over a period of two months, the young people attend one afternoon a week during school time. These sessions include group work activities such as problem solving, looking at personal and social development, as well as projects on assertiveness and anger management. These groups are deliberately kept small because many of these young people don't work well in crowded situations.

"For many of the young people, just attending the group is an achievement in itself," says Carefoot. "Often they find it hard to leave their home because of their condition and don't cope well in groups. But the barriers they face normally are broken down because they're all in a similar situation."

Space to relax

Lisa Ward, CAMHS operational manager in Stockport, says the young people appreciate the project because the emphasis is on providing informal learning in a relaxed setting. "It's a different sort of involvement to what they're used to," she says. "It's not in school or at the hospital and it's not all sitting and talking. The balance of activities really helps their self-esteem and confidence."

So far feedback from the young people has been positive, but Carefoot

acknowledges that the programme is not successful for everyone. Despite receiving lots of support, some of the young people find it hard to cope with the activities and drop out after a few weeks. He believes this is an inevitable part of working with young people with complex needs.

One of the biggest beneficiaries of the programme has been the parents, many of whom have seen a noticeable improvement in their child's attitude and wellbeing.

"Lots of the parents comment on how their son or daughter has come out of their shell since they've been on the programme," says Carefoot. "The work we do to raise young people's confidence has an impact on all aspects of their lives."

For Brian, the project is already starting to make a difference. Not only has he started to make friends, he is also optimistic about returning to mainstream school. "It's differences like this that matter in these young people's lives," says Carefoot.

[The name of the young person has been changed]

Find out more

Young People Now is running a one-day mental health conference on 25 January 2006. Delivering Accessible Quality Services to Promote the Emotional Health and Wellbeing of Young People will be held at One Whitehall Place in London.

A first event for Young People Now, this conference will aim to bring together a cross section of professionals involved in working with young people and adolescents with mental health and emotional wellbeing issues. The key theme for the day will focus around delivery of helpful and accessible services to children and adolescents with emotional and mental health issues. Explore how working in partnership with both specialists and non-specialists can aid in improving overall service provision and accessibility. For further details visit:

www.emotionalhealthconference.com