

# From youth home to being on one's own:

## Experiences of living in a youth home and later coping with adult life

Dissertation thesis / University of Helsinki / Department of Education / Sarianna Reinikainen 2009

**Subject:** experiences of women who have lived in a youth home as girls

**Two main themes:** 1) experiences of living in a youth home, and 2) experiences of coping as an adult

**Third theme:** how the research participants' placement in a youth home influenced their later life

**Empirical data:** an inquiry (62 responses) and interviews (34 participants), ages **from 20 to 50 years**, period of time spent in the youth home **from a couple of months to four years**, from **late 60's to early 2000**

Reasons for having to live in a youth home:

- **Violence:** multi-faceted, unbearable, one sided (16)
- **Crisis situation at home:** both sided, constant confrontations (3)
- **Circumstances:** parents' alcoholism, homelessness, death, exhaustion; no unbearable violence or constant confrontations (7)
- **Own behavior:** the parent(s) just fine, own crisis related to age (puberty) (3)
- **Going to a vocational school** (5): all lived in the youth home in late 60's and early 70's, moved there from a foster home

Connection with parents as adults differs relating to the reason for leaving home: when violence, non-existing or cold and formal; when another, close and warm.

### LIVING IN A YOUTH HOME

The most central result relating to the first theme: **the experiences were both shared and non-shared**. Living in a youth home was characterized by six general statements: "wonderful, real home", "new world!", safe haven ", "place to live" "penal institution", and "nightmare".

- **Nightmare** (2): These research participants had very negative experiences. They had felt themselves totally lonely and distressed, and they had been mentally worse than before, when living in their homes. They couldn't form warm relationships either with adults or with other young people, but rather felt all of them as a threat. Even though they had hoped to get out of home, the youth home was a big disappointment and leaving the youth home was a relief.

- **Penal institution** (4): These research participants' negative experiences related to the rules and practices of the youth home rather than to persons or their own state of mind. They felt the rules – especially control and sanctions – as too tight and unfair. But their own well-being wasn't as weak, and they weren't that isolated from others, as those who experienced the youth home as a nightmare.
- **A place to live** (13): For the majority the youth home was just a place to live, as there wasn't any alternative. They didn't like it there, but they didn't feel it too distressing either. Some of their experiences were positive, but mainly the atmosphere of their memories is critical.
- **New world!** (3): These girls moved from the countryside, from foster families, in early 70's, for vocational schooling. In foster home the rules and control had been tight, so the more open-minded atmosphere and more liberal practices offered them a new kind of feeling of freedom and independence. Also the company of other young people, and being together as a group, was a new and good experience.
- **Safe haven** (8): These research participants had mainly positive experiences. For them the youth home had been a place where they knew they were safe and where they were treated with respect. Mutually, they appreciated the youth home and were able to form good relationships with the adults and other young people. Some of their experiences were negative, but mainly the atmosphere of their memories is accepting.
- **Wonderful, real home** (4): To these research participants the youth home was, after previous circumstances, a wonderful place or like a paradise, and they have very warm memories from there. They could form a very close, longstanding relationship at least with one of the adults, and with other young people they made friends or at least got along just fine.

These different general sentiments seemed to be related first and foremost to whether one's own, individual needs and expectations had been met in the youth home. The strongest and most common needs, as experienced, were the needs of **safety, belongingness and respect**. On the basis of the experiences, meeting these needs can be considered as the most important task of a youth home.

### **Feeling of being at home – where?**

- In the youth home (10)
- In the youth home and elsewhere (3)
- Elsewhere (9)
- Nowhere (12)

### **Good worker from young people's perspective**

... is genuinely her/himself, ... shows that s/he cares, ... treats one individually, ... shows trust, ... creates safe atmosphere, ... deals with things flexibly

- Mainly positive experiences (12)
- Mainly negative experiences (8)
- Both positive and negative experiences – as general or depending on a worker (14)

## **COPING AS AN ADULT**

The results relating to coping as an adult were examined in two different ways. Comparisons with the general female population showed that **research participants had coped less well**. The life areas that were compared were **education, situation in working life and financial circumstances**. Differences were also found to exist in **family structures**: nuclear families and single mother families were more unusual among research participants, and **stepfamilies more common**, than in the general population. (18 of those 25 having married or cohabited as young, divorced or separated later.) However, the **experience of coping well** was common among research participants, although the beginning of independent living had been generally experienced as difficult: **feelings of loneliness, insecurity and restlessness** were dominant. Later, a sense of life control developed and strengthened through joining with others (family, work, friends), through accepting one's own life history and through creating one's own model of living.

## **SIGNIFICANCE OF LIVING IN A YOUTH HOME**

As the most significant explanation of their coping, the research participants identified their **own (innate) strength and will to cope**. The majority of them gave some credit to the youth home too, feeling that the youth home had a positive influence on their lives. Those influences can be grouped in three levels: 1) **getting out of the home**, 2) **having good experiences and learning useful things**, and 3) **the essential effect on one's own way of thinking and living**. The second level's influence includes **strengthened self-esteem, increased social understanding and new knowledge and skills**. Some research participants didn't think the youth home had any significance in terms of their later lives and coping, and some thought it had negative significance.

## **KORKKIS IN 2010**

8 girls, ages from 14 to 17

8 workers (director, 6 caretakers (one leader caretaker), cook) – each young person having a named own caretaker

Atmosphere of caring, unconditional acceptance, trust, homeliness, meeting with the basic needs the young people have and understanding their psychological pain and pain-based behavior (Anglin, James P.)