

Crucial Conversations Pilot – 18 month Report (Sep 09 – March 11)

This interim report explores progress made on a two-year intergenerational mediation pilot aimed at young people and their parents/carers. The free service for families was made available where there is a serious breakdown in family relationships and/or where the young person is in danger of being homeless or is already homeless.

Where our approach differs to most mediation services, and especially to those working with families, is in bringing together young and older mediators. This mirrors the power dynamics in the family relationship as well as good cross-generational communication. We are exploring the potential of mediation both to support parents and their teens to connect better, and to keep young homelessness figures down.

Initially this pilot was funded by the Andrews Charitable Trust and the Parenting Fund. Parenting Fund support ends in March 2011. With the Andrews funding, a 16-hrs per week project manager was recruited in September 2009 with a brief to develop a service which was structured in a way that it could be stand alone and self financing or partially self financing project.

Over the last 18 months we have:

- Recruited for and set up the service
- identified and trained young mediators
- Put experienced mediators through a focussed review
- Promoted the service by developing contacts with a range of referral agencies and producing a 'Crucial Conversations' leaflet explaining the service
- Worked with 15 parents, 11 young people and 4 extended family members
- Received referrals from a range of agencies
- Evaluated the impact of interventions at time of service and 3 months later
- Continually reviewed and developed the service, as this is very much a pilot.

Number of referrals	15
Referral routes	YOT
	Family Intervention services
	Safeplace
	Schools
	Connexions
	EMAP
Total number of parents/carers and extended family worked with	19
Number of young people worked with	11

“If we have a problem we sit down and talk about it. Things aren't perfect but before we just used to scream at each other.”

What's been the impact?

100% of initial evaluations from parents, young people and referrers reported improved communication between parents and young person. Initial evaluation and follow up assessments also indicated the following outcomes:

- Greater confidence in dealing with conflict in the family
- Greater clarity for parties around issues of conflict
- Greater clarity for parents and young person around implications of staying at home or leaving
- Positive impact on young person's opportunity to remain at home

Sustainability of impact

Initial feedback from referrers and families was very good and indicated favourable outcomes from the process. However when we contacted the parties 3-6 months later, it was clear that the initial positivity in the family was hard to sustain. Early indicators of improved communication, changes in behaviour and an expectation of staying at home longer were not necessarily maintained in the long run. It has become evident that deeply ingrained communication patterns and family dynamics require much more in depth conflict coaching and support than our initial model had allowed for. Our overall impression has been that parents/carers were often more reluctant – or less able – than their child to accept their own contribution to the dynamic.

This has had several implications for the pilot:

1. It became clear after the first few cases that our initial model of one meeting with child, one with parent/carer and then a joint meeting needed to change. There was not enough time for parents to reflect on how to change their patterns of behaviour, nor enough time for the child to build relationships of trust with the mediators – several were already involved with youth justice processes. However, expanding the model to include additional coaching to both parties before and after had/has significant resource implications.
2. If we did expand the process to include more prior coaching sessions with the young person and the parents – as we have - all parties have to want to engage with such intense work, and especially the parents/carers. It has been noticeable that parents often deny the impact of their behaviour on the situation and are often unwilling to acknowledge movement in their children.
3. Young mediators have to have a high degree of 'presence' and self awareness in order to engage a young person and develop the trust required to explore their feelings on short acquaintance. Both older and younger mediators have also needed to model respectful communication between

CASE STUDY: Avoiding family breakdown

Communication had broken down between the 17-yr-old girl and her parents in a professional Pakistani Muslim family, with explosions of anger and resentment about the young person staying out at her boyfriend's, smoking and drinking. Community Resolve paired a senior male conflict worker (British-born Pakistani) with a young English female to work as co-mediators, their diverse ages/backgrounds reassuring family members that their differing values and beliefs were recognised and understood. Over several weeks, the mediators worked with the family both separately and together, aiming for increased understanding and respect between the young woman and her parents rather than a 'happy ever after' scenario. The preparation before joint meetings was key to clarifying everyone's desires for the future, as well as their part in the current conflict. After two joint meetings, both the young person and her parents agreed that they could not live under the same roof, and that it was better for her to live independently. The daughter moved out of the family home in a managed process which kept basic communication channels open, and she is now in regular contact with her mother, is attending university and has recently gained a First in her first year examinations.

themselves, in particular developing a practice which allows the younger mediator to play their part, and be seen to play their part, in leading the process.

4. Building deeper relationships with family members means mediators need clearer boundaries around what is essentially a mentoring service in addition to transforming the family conflict. Those mentoring family members would benefit from counselling skills in addition to conflict management skills.
5. A wider pool of mediators /mentors will be necessary, as well as increased management to coordinate communication between workers and the conflict coaching and mediation process.
6. It has become clear that the mediation process is not suitable for crisis intervention and is better positioned as part of an integrated service.

Mediators for the community

In addition to the impact on the young people and their families who have participated in the mediation process, there have been additional benefits to the community in which the project is based. Because of this pilot, 15 local young people have had the opportunity to receive training in mediation and conflict coaching, thus improving the skills base and conflict awareness of young people in the local area, as well as providing opportunities for young people to be involved in their local community and earn money while making a positive contribution.

A new training programme was developed to provide a specific skills base for the project. Identifying suitably experienced and culturally aware older mediators was key, with the same qualities of openness needed in our young mediators. Developing a specific intergenerational training for them has been integral to the development of the project and the individuals involved. All our young mediators have received 16-20hrs of specific training for this project, with observations and additional ongoing training planned, as well as basic mediation training.

The recently completed ‘Introduction to Intergenerational Mediation’ training was delivered to a mix of 18 local young people from a range of backgrounds and workers from Connexions involved in youth engagement/homelessness advice work. The programme consisted of one four hour evening session over four weeks. All were aware from the start that we would be selecting only four to five of the group to work as young mediators for the Crucial Conversations Project in order to replace those who, in the nature of young people, have moved on to other jobs or study. Four are now working as mediators, and one of the four (Jahanna, right pic below in black hat) has recently been taken on by Community Resolve as a 4-day trainee conflict support worker via the Future Jobs Fund.

Others who completed the sessions will be offered further opportunities to develop their skills around conflict by participating in other areas of Community Resolve’s conflict work in their particular communities. To date, two of our young mediators have received national awards from Leap Confronting Conflict for their part in helping to address conflicts in their community.



What's the learning so far?

In addition to the implications for the pilot highlighted above, we have summarised the key points to emerge so far on the table on the next page, with our initial ideas for how to address/improve on issues arising and practice concerns.

Issue/Topic	Actions/Recommendation
<p>Retaining Young mediators The capacity to meet the demand created for the service has to be balanced with making sure that there would be enough cases for young mediators to be involved in so their interest and enthusiasm is not lost.</p>	<p>Ensure young mediators are not trained too early in the projects development, or too many trained at one time.</p> <p>Provision of ongoing training for young mediators and conflict workers.</p> <p>Careful management of expectations and provision of volunteering or sessional work in the wider activities of the organisation</p>
<p>Evaluations Initial evaluation methods were qualitative and retrospective and di not provide a base line evaluation from which to measure change over time.</p> <p>Conflict is a very sensitive area and parties were often not willing to participate in evaluation conversations beyond the process</p>	<p>Distance travelled questions with 1-10 values are filled in with parties as part of the initial meetings and the same questions are asked at the end of the process, establishing a clearer measure of changes.</p> <p>When the initial questionnaires are filled in there is a frank discussion about the parties possible reluctance to 'dredge up conflict issues and participate in evaluation in the future and the purpose of evaluations is explained.</p>
<p>Parties looking at their part in conflict Mediators found a reluctance, particularly on the part of the parents to look at their role in perpetuation often very entrenched family reactions to conflict</p>	<p>Additional conflict coaching sessions (4-6 x 90 minute sessions) for both parents and young people offered prior to mediation to help parties come to a clearer understanding of the issues around their conflicts and the part they play in them</p>
<p>Sustaining results Parties finding it difficult to maintain changes in behaviour or entrenched attitudes</p>	<p>Continuation of conflict coaching sessions (up to 6) after mediation in order to support parties to maintain changes in behaviour</p> <p>Follow up mediation session timetabled in at the end of first mediation meeting</p> <p>Managing expectations over length of involvement and devising a clear exit strategy with parties</p>
<p>Appropriate selection of referrals Some referrals were too serious and entrenched for mediation process – eg family violence including assault charges of violence against mothers, etc</p>	<p>Shifting from taking all referrals to those where the relationships are not at the point of crisis – ie leading up to or post relationship breakdown - see case study. This has a higher chance of lasting impact and fits better with the organisation's ethos of 'conflict transformation' – working to establish/transform good longterm relationships, rather than a short-term emergency fix.</p>
<p>Young person participation Some cases have not proceeded after referral although parents have wanted to proceed, as young person did not show up to arranged meetings</p>	<p>Initial contact arranged by young conflict coach. Overall the project has achieved a high level of young person participation, in part due to the young person being able to relate to the young mediator.</p> <p>Where a young person has failed to turn up to meetings with the younger and older mediator, our initial meeting now on a more casual footing - typically a cafe where the young person and a young conflict coach/ mediator chat through what's in it for them.</p>
<p>Business stand alone potential The project has received most of its referrals from local government or government funded organisations with very limited current and future budgets. The service has been offered free of charge as a pilot it so is difficult to assess take-up once charging.</p>	<p>Developing our marketing in schools and colleges, including private schools where there may be scope for privately funded conflict coaching for young people and their families.</p> <p>Explore possible mergers – Bristol Mediation etc</p>

