Building self efficacy: increasing positive behaviour

Benefits of self efficacy

There are a large number of studies that examine the positive outcomes that are associated with self efficacy - the confidence that people have about their ability to overcome obstacles in their lives and to reach goals they set for themselves.

In general young people with higher self efficacy cope better with stressful life circumstances. They are also more likely to take action to protect their health, to adopt new, healthy habits and to maintain behaviour change. People with higher self efficacy tend to be more optimistic and hopeful and they persist and try harder in the face of obstacles. Young people who are optimistic tend to do better at school or college, abuse drugs less, and have less anger, better health and fewer social problems.[1]

Building self efficacy

Ensuring that young people contribute meaningfully to planning and decision making about their lives helps build self efficacy. The most powerful source of self efficacy is the experience of success in reaching self defined goals. Research evidence shows that a young person's ability to make choices about the activities he or she is involved in has a direct impact on their mood and well being. They also perform better on activities they choose themselves[2].

Failing to engage young people

There are many examples of a failure to engage young people meaningfully. In a study of boys in the child welfare system in England Leeson[3] found that the boys had 'overwhelming feelings of helplessness experienced as a consequence of not being involved in decision making…. The boys were all scared of making decisions and did not know how to make them.' In another study of young people's perceptions of mental health services young people emphasised the lack of control they had and how that made them resist the help offered "if a social worker says 'you've got to do this, you've got to do that' I'll get mad and then I'll just flip on them" [4]

When young people are doing something because they want to, are making choices in the development of plans they tend to be happier and more engaged, try harder, achieve more and do better. There is a wealth of research that compares the experiences of people who feel they are acting autonomously – by their own choice – and those who are externally controlled.

Learning skills through participation

People develop self-efficacy in large part because of having successful experiences and using their own skills and resources to achieve personally meaningful goals.

The evidence is that young people can learn the skills for solving problems. These skills can be promoted and developed through meaningful participation in planning and decision making. Participation isn't meaningful unless a young person is able to have an impact on the decision that becomes part of the plan. Meaningful participation is where the young person has the opportunity to make real choices for the plan and influence decision making. Young person need encouragement and support to take an active role in such meetings, and they also need access to information to help inform the process. Making decisions, creating plans and seeing how they are progressing contributes to young people's self determination and self efficacy.

---

[1] Roberts MC, Brown KJ et al Positive psychology for children in Handbook of positive psychology 2002

[2] Weinstein SM Mermelstein R Relations between daily activities and adolescent mood: The role of autonomy Journal of Clinical Child and Adolecent Psychology 2007

[3] leeson C my life in care: experience of non participation in decision making processes. Child and family Social Work 2007

[4] Stanley N young people's and carers' perspectives on mental health needs of looked after adolescents Child and Family Social Work 2007