



Exploring the impact of significant life events for children with intellectual disabilities

We know that life events shape us all and impact on our adult years. This obviously is the same for our students and their families. The journey that they tread before arriving at Sunfield will already have determined where they are at emotionally. This in turn will affect their interactions, relationships, behaviours and emotional well being. Understanding the life changing events that have occurred for our students and their families enables us to tailor the current support they receive.

The quality of early attachments is an important part of the developmental journey and can be heavily influenced by such factors as the separations that occur due to premature birth, parental well being, family dynamics, etc. This may be further impacted when the move to a residential service such as Sunfield is necessary. All of these experiences result in a sense of loss on varying levels for individuals and it is essential that we recognise the impact of this grief cycle on their emotional well being. Many students now come to Sunfield with a recognised diagnosis of Attachment Disorder or at least display behaviours which would indicate attachment issues. Equally, their families also arrive at Sunfield having to face similar issues of loss and grief. It is important, therefore, that we understand the journey that has gone before their arrival in order that we don't assume the move to Sunfield as being the only issue to be addressed.

This project will use a case study approach and aims to explore the extent to which life events impact upon the emotional well being of children with disabilities and their families within a residential context. Using a life events timeline approach the project aims to encourage parents to map their significant life events leading up to the present day and explore the impact each has had on them. This will be achieved over two interviews; the first to complete the life events timeline and the second to explore the events and their potential impact. The same process will be repeated focusing on their child's life. The timeline approach will then be used to map the student's life events since moving to Sunfield and will be completed by the Student Development Team linked to the child.

This process will generate information that can be used for two purposes:

A) All three timelines will be used to develop a picture of the child's entire life span, identifying those significant events which may impact upon their emotional well being.

B) The parent's personal timelines will offer them space to share their story and then, through a follow up questionnaire, will be used to gain a family perspective of the usefulness of using the timeline approach.

This approach offers Sunfield the opportunity to achieve different outcomes for the child and their family. The specific data within the timelines will enable us to understand how life events have impacted upon the child and how we appropriately address those needs by developing a training programme for staff.

The process of using a timeline also provides us with an appropriate tool to enable families to share their life stories when they first come to Sunfield. This in turn will allow us to be better informed to support their needs.