

## ***Implementing New Authority in residential care Process of strengthening the authority of a team***

(by Maisam Madi\*)

***Abstract: residential groups for children are common in the Belgium wealth fare system. In groups designated for children with emotional and behavioral problems, aggression and violence in the residential house is common. While NVR has been a model that confronts violence in residential settings for several years, the new authority model (NA) still needs adaption to this setting. In this paper, I present a process of strengthening authority figures in a residential team using the NA model. I share challenges found in this setting and how they were handled. I conclude with thoughts of residential care as a work place with unique challenges. I end with suggested NA knowledge and skills that should be at focus for each position of the team during an implementation process.***

### **Introduction**

Belgium's wealth fare services include residential care for children and youth with different needs. Part of that service targets behavioral and emotional problems. A common work model in organizations is of small home groups, including 5-15 children at similar ages, and a team of educators working in shifts around the clock so that at least one educator is always present at the house. The educators take care of the children's needs, which are normally the parent's responsibility, and include practical daily arrangements, education, behavior and health. The team usually includes educators with specific functions to work with the child's family. Each team has a leader that is responsible for the general functioning of the group, as well as, practical and pedagogical programs.

Specific groups for behavioral and emotional problems include a wide range of cases. Due to the characteristics of the children in these groups, aggression and violence are common and pose a challenge for the educational teams. Violent behaviors tend to occupy the team and reduce their ability to function in the context of education on topics such as; communication and health. If the violence in a group prevails, it weakens the authority of the educators creating feelings of frustration and helplessness in the team. Therefore, the introduction of New Authority and Non-Violent Resistance to residential groups was natural, although the classic model was initially developed for use with families.

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Much work has been done to incorporate the NA model into the daily work of residential teams. The current approach to implementation is through training and supervision, as to provide the teams' knowledge and practical tools. Although the use of NA is spreading in residential care, there remains a need to adapt the classic model to the new setting with its unique challenges. In this paper I will present an attempt to implement NA in a residential team through using the model to facilitate a process of strengthening with the authority figures. I will discuss some of the challenges in residential care, and end with suggested NA knowledge and skills needed for the different positions in a team.

### **Team process with a residential group (case example)**

Description of the group: The group included 13 girls between the ages of 16-18 with behavioral and emotional problems. Each girl lived in her own studio, and the house included a common sitting area. The team had two leaders: One was responsible of practical daily work with the educators as well as the girls; the second was responsible for pedagogical content and individual programs. The team included seven educators working in the group (Begeleider) most of them new to the profession and two educators specific for context (Context Begeleider). The house had a designated room for the educators to work, close to the main entrance. It was reported that the group was dealing with aggressive and violent behavior on a daily basis, often including incidents that needed the involvement of the police.

Team assessment: At first I joined the staff's daily schedule to learn about the work they do, and to assess the violence problem in the group as well as the team's ability to react. The violence occurred daily, especially during the evening when most of the girls were back to their studios. Violence included yelling, shouting, slamming doors, cursing, threatening and sometimes pushing, kicking or hitting. It also seemed that the connection between the girls and the educators was unstable and disturbed. The leaders of the team expressed concerns to the rising number of incidents, as well as several failed attempts to restore calm. They had also recently done a NVR process with a specific girl showing violent behavior guided by an external supervision, with minimal effect on the overall violence problem in the group and the team's ability to handle it.

The educator's response to violence varied from trying to create a dialogue, to giving into the demands of the girls. From talks done with the team, it seemed that the group did not have a clear plan for dealing with violent behaviors and so the reactions varied between staff members, girls and consequential behaviors. Some educators expressed concerns of having to deal with violence on a daily basis, while others expressed feeling helplessness and despair. Some thought this was a normal and acceptable state for a house with this particular group of girls. In general it seemed that the team was 'surviving' the violent events and trying to attend to the many educational tasks and personal needs of the girls.

The team was familiar with the NVR model through internal training done by the organization. The team reported that they believed in the model, they tried to de-escalate situations while using bookmark; however, that they didn't have a clear view on how to proceed from there. It seemed that in the violent atmosphere the team had lost their ability to react on the girl's behaviors. The leading team tried to target the behavior of specific girls using personal educational plans. The plans were not consistent and did not take into account the behaviors of other girls in the group. The directors of the company were often

involved, and reacted to the girls in extreme cases of violence. However the responses were sporadic and focused on solving the situation at hand.

Work process (4 months): The focus of the work was using NA model to facilitate a process to strengthen the *team* members as the direct authority figures in the house, by building a house-program for dealing with violence and developing the leading teams' ability to promote change in the team. The need to stabilize the connection between the girls and the educators was kept in mind, however was not the first focus of the intervention. The work was done through presence in daily work with the educators (physical and virtual), weekly group meeting dedicated to NA and dealing with violence, scheduled meetings with the leading team, and in later phases individual work on the floor with some of the educators. In addition meetings with the directors of the company were held often due to their occasional involvement with the girls and the educators, as well as their direct work with the leading team.

The weekly group work was set as part of the team meeting. At first, we worked to identify the problem the team faces as a group and the narrative they hold, while slowly using NA concepts to understand and build a new narrative in the social and cultural context. We focused on understanding escalations through examples in their group from daily work. We discussed and practiced de-escalating, marking and delayed reaction using simulations based on those examples. Meanwhile in meetings with the leaders, a plan was established specifically for the house that incorporates NA and NVR concepts into concrete daily actions that strengthen the team as a network of authority figures. To support the process done within the team the involvement of external functions such as directors and supervisors was planned and synced to fit the new plan.

We then started using the skills practiced at the group meetings to create change in the daily challenges, such as not allowing girls into the educators' room and consistent bedtime. Following this work, we began implementing the non-violence resistance program in the daily work of the educators, starting with an announcement in the presence of each girl and her context. The plan focused on de-escalating, marking and delayed reaction through practical actions accustomed to the teams' characteristics and experience. It also included a plan for different non-violent reactions that were based on the organization and the system's hierarchy as well as, the context, creating a span of reactions varying in strength of message. These actions were tailored to fit this specific team enabling them to start reacting. The use of hierarchy facilitated building a network of authority figures across different levels of the organization.

Through monitoring daily incidents and talks with the team members, we began to see a decrease in duration, frequency and severity of the violent acts; and later a decrease in the quantity. The educators started reacting in a synced and co-ordinated way, emphasizing the use of **'we'** in their language and behavior. The reactions were persistent in accordance with the resistance principles of NVR. The educators reported feeling stronger as authority figures, were able to practice de-escalating better and then started reporting a decrease in the sense of helplessness. It also seemed that with the use of the structured plan of responding and reacting, the educators were more available to establish and stabilize the connection with the girls in between events and reactions.

Following the substantial decrease in aggression and violence on a group level, we noticed that most of the events that still occurred happened primarily with two of the girls in the house. A specific plan for each girl was created and incorporated as part of the general group plan. Also at this phase, short individual work was done with some of the educators to strengthen their ability to de-escalate. Following

this work, we saw further decline in violent behaviors. To maintain the positive change achieved, a violence coordinator position was established intended to continue overseeing, monitoring and managing reactions in the group.

Summary: This process using NA model was effective in helping authority figures working in residential care to get out of helplessness and escalations, and into a position where they are able to de-escalate and respond using non-violent delayed reactions. The process influenced the group of children, while monitoring showed decreased violence in the house. This attempt for implementing NA in residential care was done using the model to facilitate a process of strengthening the team of educators as authority figures in the house. The goal was to use the basic concepts and way of thinking to face different challenging points when dialogues fail, while focusing on resisting violent behaviors.

### **Challenges for NA in residential teams**

Working in residential care groups as a work setting introduced some unique challenges that were taken into account during the process described in this paper. For the direct authority figures in contact with the children (the educators), the connections and obligations are in a professional context, as opposed to the personal relationships in families. That introduces some challenges as to skills, abilities, motivation, and extent of involvement and patience of each educator. These matters were addressed through daily presence with the team, the use of language that focuses on their professional skills as educators, and work on their motivation as a group of workers. Instead of ‘NA concepts’ and ‘tools,’ the term ‘NA skills’ was used through the whole process, emphasizing it being a work setting.

Another challenge encountered was the connection between the children and the educators. Although it is possible to establish good and healthy connections with children in these groups, sometimes it is difficult to stabilize the connection, especially when behavioral problems arise. The process with the team focused on using delayed reactions, mostly by other team members. The purpose was to enable separation between the violent events and the teams’ reaction to them, promoting positive connection that is independent of the child’s behavior. In addition the delayed reactions that were chosen focused on the official relationship between the girls and the organization instead of the personal connection.

The internal dynamics in the team can sometimes influence the process done, however close and daily presence in the field allowed giving attention to and working with those dynamics. The physical and emotional distance between the child and the family challenges the ability to incorporate them in the work process. Although in this example, the use of context was low at this phase, it is intended to be targeted in later phases through work with the context educators. Another unique aspect of residential care is the hierarchy pyramid that tends to be smaller in families nowadays. In such groups, the pyramid usually consists of educators, team leaders, supervisors, directors, as well as, the involvement of social workers (consultant) and judges. Although the different roles and simultaneous involvement created difficulties at the beginning, the proper constructive use of this hierarchy benefitted and facilitated the process and helped to achieve the goal.

## Skills for using NA in different positions

While applying the model in work setting such as residential care, the main focus of the process was developing and improving the ability of being a New Authority figure. During close work with the teams thoughts on the different skills needed for each position in the team came to mind. It seems that the development of these different skills in the team is an important factor in the implementation of NA model in residential teams. It is also important to insure the use of the concepts and NVR tools and acts in the long term.

The team leader holds a key position as to set an example of being an authority figure to the team. He/She must also be able to lead team and individual processes, as well as individual interventions. The ability to build and customize such process could be his responsibility or given to a different function, such as an internal director or supervisor. The educators working daily with the children need the core skills of NA that include de-escalating, marking and delayed reaction as well as the ability to send clear messages in non-escalating ways. The context educators in general need NA skills for working with parents and the context. However, specifically for the work in the residential house they need the ability to recruit parents to support the team’s reactions and participate in them if needed. The team as a whole needs the ability to work together, support each other and act together as a network of authority figures. Finally the organization should function as a broader network that supports and helps the team in a synced and co-ordinated way (summary in following table).

*Table – Summary of NA skills in different positions*

<u><b>Team leader/ Leading team</b></u>	<u><b>Group educators</b></u>
<p><b>Being NA in daily work</b> Use of NA principles daily, in contact with children and educators. Facilitates implementation in daily language and actions; Sets an example for the team</p> <p><b>Leading a team process</b> Use NA model when authority is challenged; lead a strengthening process with team/educators</p> <p><b>Leading an intervention trajectory</b> Use NA as part of an intervention in specific cases</p> <p><b>Building processes and trajectories</b> Detect a need of intervention; build a work plan *can be the function of intemal director or supervisor</p>	<p>Skills in de-escalating</p> <p>Ability to send persistent strong messages</p> <p>Ability to use marking and delayed reaction</p>
	<u><b>Context educators</b></u>
	<p>Ability to lead NA trajectory with parents</p> <p>Ability to expand context/network</p> <p>Ability to recruit parents to participate in reactions done by the team</p>
<p><i>Team – ability to act together as a network</i></p>	
<p><i>Organization – ability to function as a broad network of support</i></p>	

## Conclusions

The example presented in this paper describes a process of implementing the NA model in a residential care team. Although commonly the model is implemented by giving trainings and external supervisions, this process was done through close and daily work with the team members. The main conclusion from this experience is that when used as a process of strengthening the workers as authority figures, this model is effective in reducing behavioral problems in the group such as violence. The change reported in the educators' stand as authority figures and the decrease in violent events support the models' suitability for work in this setting.

During such work, it is important to focus on the process of the team as a whole and to adjust the use of methods and tools as the process continues. It is also important to focus on developing and improving the NA skills that workers need in accordance with their specific role in the team. If the team is part of an organization and not functioning independently, it is crucial to develop and combine the surrounding and supporting functions that are involved with and influence the team. Other levels of the organization should be developed as a broader support network for the team as well.

Though there are many similarities in different teams and organizations, each process should be adapted to the specific team that it is intended for. The characteristics of the different team members, the leading teams' abilities and the overall dynamics of the group should be taken into account while designing such a process. When implementing the model in residential care, special attention should be given to organizational aspects and processes due to it being a work place with a professional atmosphere. It seems that these aspects lay in the base of challenges unique to this setting, and are crucial to the successful implementation of the model and its long term use.