



KIDS COMPANY

A DIAGNOSIS OF THE ORGANISATION AND ITS INTERVENTIONS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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This research studied the model of intervention of Kids Company, a third sector organisation in the UK funded in 1996 with the primary purpose of supporting vulnerable children, young people and their families. It reviewed available evidence on the impact of Kids Company on its clients and investigated the internal structure of the organisation and its interventions.

The research design was multi-methodological, psychosocial and ethnographic, combining quantitative and qualitative methodologies. Fieldwork took place between February and March 2013. The database comprises:

- 5 focus groups with Kids Company's staff and volunteers;
- 24 individual interviews (4 semi-structured and 20 unstructured) with Kids Company's staff and volunteers;
- 85 online questionnaires of staff and volunteers working across Kids Company's sites and programmes;
- Systematic observations based on a pre-designed observation template of 32 activities.

Statistical analysis using SPSS was conducted for the quantitative strand of the research. The qualitative thematic analysis was conducted using NVivo.

CLIENTS, WORK AND IMPACT

- Kids Company works with the most vulnerable children and youth in the UK (mainly in London). Its services reach 36,000 children, young people and their families. Its clients experience severe developmental adversity, being exposed to food insecurity, poverty, poor housing, violence and social exclusion, abuse and substance misuse, low educational and employment aspirations, domestic maltreatment and unstable home environments.
- Developmental adversity is associated with changes in brain structure and function, genetic expression, behavioural and emotional dysregulation. The impact of adverse developmental conditions spans from the biology of the human body, to the psychology of the person to the cohesion and integration of communities and larger public spheres.

- Kids Company's model of intervention invests in the potential of neuroplasticity, providing actions and structures of support that can alter neural pathways and provide the opportunity for positive emotional and behavioural changes in vulnerable children and young people.
- Kids Company makes a substantial difference in the lives of its clients; its actions have positive impact on practical knowledge to deal with financial issues and access to services, housing and accommodation, engagement with family members, criminal involvement, substance misuse, educational attainment and overall physical and emotional well-being.
- Interventions and programmes based on attachment have a positive impact on the cognitive, emotional and social capacities of the self.
- Kids Company's services are heavily oversubscribed with demand outstripping capacity. The charity struggles to maintain its open-door policy.

THE MODEL

- The model of work of Kids Company establishes interfaces at three levels: the children, their families and immediate environment, the statutory sector and the wider public sphere.
- Kids Company acts as mediators, facilitating communication between the interfaces sustained with clients, their social environment and the statutory sector.
- Kids Company works as brokers, translators and advocates giving visibility to the invisible, challenging dominant representations of children in need and demanding from authorities and statutory agencies that the needs of vulnerable children and young people are met.
- Kids Company acts as boundary crossers building bridges between their communities, corporate volunteers, the media and academia.
- Kids Company works with an absolute focus on the child and total commitment to the power of healthy attachment to change lives. They act as parents by proxy supporting the client unconditionally and providing nurturing and loving relationships.
- Kids Company's interventions aim to re-define the relational patterns experienced by children in need, offering positive attachment and

unconditional support based on perseverance, the practice of love and long-term commitment to the relationship established.

- Kids Company is unafraid of using a language of emotions; it brings back to the debate about children in need the frequently absent language of emotional care and unconditional love as central for containment, healing and positive sociability.
- Kids Company uses cutting edge neurological and psychological evidence to inform its delivery and to design service provision. It integrates biological and psychosocial theories to better understand clients. It actively collaborates with researchers in academic institutions and its database is informing new research on developmental adversity and third sector interventions.
- Structures and actions of support operate internally and externally to facilitate dialogue and cross-fertilisation between the inside and the outside, between the charity, its clients and the wider environment.
- Structures of support for staff address practical and emotional dimensions and involve multiple procedures and levels of interaction, including managerial, technological, peer and group-based and one-to-one exchanges that take place formally and informally.
- Kids Company enjoys the presence of an exceptional leader whose charisma, open-door policy and strong presence in the British public sphere greatly contribute to the effectiveness of the charity.
- Kids Company presents an exemplary model of psychosocial scaffolding interconnecting the emotional and practical scaffolding of delivery with the scaffolding of relations between clients and their families. Looking after staff so that staff can look after vulnerable children and families is paramount for the model of Kids Company. These different chains of scaffolding hold together the overall vision of Kids Company.

DELIVERY AND INTERFACES

- The charity provides flexible and in-depth tailored engagement, adjusting its practices to the needs of individual clients on the ground. It combines a bottom-up, situation-led approach to theoretical and empirical evidence on the behaviour of vulnerable children.
- Therapy and the creative arts play a substantial role in the work of Kids Company enabling vulnerable children to expand cognitive and emotional skills and develop non-verbal languages to elaborate their experiences.
- Kids Company works with public services in areas such as social services, schools and the NHS, including local GPs, hospitals and mental health centres. It bears witness to the level of services

delivered to vulnerable children and aims at holding the state accountable to children.

- Kids Company fills the gaps left open by the state and its services, welcoming and containing children and young people that are abandoned and excluded from school, from social services and other statutory institutions.
- Kids Company enjoys an internal environment where plurality of perspectives, multidisciplinary practice and openness to situations enhance bold decision-making, a doer's attitude and flexibility to accommodate the challenging and demanding realities of clients.
- Kids Company presents exceptionally high levels of satisfaction and motivation amongst staff and volunteers. Staff and volunteers are proud of their work and profoundly committed to the organisation and its aims. They identify with the goals of the charity and feel empowered and individually rewarded by the work they deliver.
- Horizontal communication and peer support enhance the shared intentionality of the organisation and the feelings of well-being that permeate the work of staff. There is a positive sociability and a light atmosphere despite the nature of the problems that the charity addresses. This is beneficial for staff as well as for the children who come into these spaces to experience group cohesion, a positive social identity and a strong sense of community.
- Social capital based on high levels of cohesion and staff morale remains an important asset that is daily utilised to nurture the internal working environment of the charity and provide a positive model for the children.
- From documents and paper work, which clients often have difficulty understanding, to help at school, therapy and parenting by proxy, Kids Company helps to construct a gateway through which children and young people can enter the social order, develop trust and form healthy attachments to adults.

CHALLENGES

- Limited and unstable funding is a major source of stress and anxiety for staff and a massive challenge for the sustainability of Kids Company.
- The interface with the statutory sector is a complex and considerable challenge, involving collaboration as well as constant tension due to divergent organisational cultures, different approaches to theory and practice, prejudices and preconceptions.
- An increase in bureaucracy and excessive management can jeopardise the effectiveness of Kids Company and presents a challenge to its ability to sustain absolute focus on the needs of its clients.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Key conclusions and broad recommendations arising from this study are:

Kids Company works directly to counteract the effects of developmental adversity, which is a major threat to the future of healthy societies and cohesive public spheres.

- Support and invest in organisations that are addressing developmental adversity;
- Develop research collaborations and knowledge exchange initiatives that integrate work on developmental adversity across different domains and fields of intervention;
- Raise awareness about the negative impact of developmental adversity on brain, mind and society;
- Recognise the expertise and experience of charities working on the ground for the development of research and policy.

Kids Company combines flexibility and staff commitment to enable absolute focus on the needs of vulnerable children; they offer to the child the knowledge that someone cares, loves and will not give them up, irrespective of any challenging and unstable response that may come back from the child.

- Disseminate the approach of Kids Company and raise awareness about its model of psychosocial scaffolding for re-writing fractured lives;
- Foster debate and reflection amongst care professionals, researchers, policy makers and government about the role of love and unconditional support in the management of developmental adversity;
- Recognise that challenging behaviour is an adaptive response of vulnerable children to developmental adversity; blaming children and young people is unproductive and pushes them further away from positive sociality;
- Adjust formal systems to bottom-up realities that do not conform to rigid managerial cultures; faceless bureaucracies are expensive and ineffective in delivering care for those in need.

Collaborations between Kids Company and the statutory sector involve substantial challenges; addressing these challenges is imperative for supporting children and young people in need as dialogue and cooperation between sectors can be beneficial to all.

- Develop spaces for dialogue and joint practice for staff working in Kids Company and the statutory sector;
- Create programmes for staff exchange and secondments between sectors;
- Share research and evaluations to minimise misconceptions and increase knowledge of how Kids Company works;
- Maximise the use of evidence produced by research partnerships to engage statutory services and raise awareness of Kids Company's work, strengthening the public sector's vision and strategy.

Kids Company works as a border crosser and mediator between disadvantaged children and the wider public sphere; however, much work remains to be done to raise the visibility of vulnerable children and the work of the charity in the UK and internationally.

- Foster partnerships with different sectors in society and commit the private sector to engage with children in need;
- Work with the media to raise awareness about the high levels of risk and marginalisation suffered by vulnerable children and other invisible populations living in the UK;
- Consider the development of international partnerships that can connect the experience of the third sector in the UK to that of other societies.