Towards a better tomorrow – what do young people think of their experiences of abuse?

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Background:

• Federation of Mother and child homes and Shelters, Finnish National Institute for Health and Welfare & Pesäpuu ry organized youth forum for young people who have experienced violence.
  • Neglect, sexual, mental, physical abuse, domestic violence...
• Psychological safety is the key for working with young people around this subject.
  • Before, during, after.
• Every participant this year had background in being in the care system.
• Experts by experience working alongside professionals.
The legacy of nonviolence?

- This is the question we tried to find answer to with young people in the youth forum.

- During the forum we talked about fear, arguments and how professionals should meet children and young people who have experienced abuse. We also wondered if the experiences of abuse have lead to any personal growth.
Encountering young people who have experienced abuse

”Break the culture of silencing!”
”Take the time and get to know the person!”
”Believe and take seriously the child’s experience.”
”Speak truthfully and straight.”
”All the experiences aren’t visible on the outside.”
”What you assume isn’t necessarily the truth.”
”Be worthy of the trust!”
It’s hard to share fears if one has to fear at the same time...
...or if one doesn’t even understand what they feel is fear.

• Fear might be hard to identify.
• Being afraid of something might have become the normal.
• Being afraid of something can lead to other feelings i.e. rage and hate.
• The reasons why one is afraid of something might be hard to share – if one has to fear to be betrayed at the same time.

”Children and young people have lived in circumstances where they couldn’t be afraid. Being afraid was a taboo.”
"It’s normal to argue from time to time"

"Is it normal if you never argue?"

- What sort of arguments are we talking about?
  - Is it dangerous, violent and destructive?
  - Or is it safe, constructive and respectful?
- One can escape arguments, either by leaving the situation or the relationship.
- For arguments to be constructive there needs to be trust.
  - ”What happens if we argue?”
- Requirement for good and safe arguing is being able to identify and accept one’s own feelings.
- The way one argues is learnt from home and one’s own environment.
  - If not, who teaches us?
Growth

• Young people who have experienced abuse in their lives identified personal growth in their lives due to these experiences.
• They felt deeper, more profound understanding and ability to encounter and address their own lives and the lives around them.
• ”Being able to forgive but never forget.”
  • ”Deeper, more profound understanding.”
• ”Being able to let go.”
  • ”Emphaty”, ”Gratitude”, ”Sensitivity”, ”Strength”
• ”Ability for selfreflection”
  • ”Living in the now”
• ”Ability to be childish at the right time”
  • ”Right values”
What we need more?

- True presence.
- Getting to know each other.
- Trust.
- Working with emotions.
- ”I’m here if you ever want to talk.”
- Holistic and timely support for families.
- Understanding violence and the fact it’s never ok, it’s never normal.
- Understanding cultural differences.
- The power of peer support.
Young people feel gratitude and pride about the fact that even though they have experienced abuse and other hardship in their lives, they have been able to find themselves, find value in their lives and tools to cope even in difficult situations.

You have to live in the present, be okay with yourself and your past, keep looking forward. Doing so, young people need help from the adults. To walk beside them, cheer them on and to enable them to grow.
• Young people’s voices should be heard more. As the youth forums experience has confirmed, young people are capable of talking about their experiences of abuse.

• We should hear and heed this precious expert by experience knowledge.
Thanks!

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