

## Supporting Our Vulnerable Girls

Feedback and next steps from our one-day CPD conference, 8<sup>th</sup> Nov 2017

- Girls hugely value female-only time and space.
- They want support that's light touch, offers active listening and is long term.
- They have plenty to contribute to adult training and practice development given the opportunity.
- Professionals ensuring girls' voices are heard is critical to supporting them.

Just some of the conclusions reached by teachers and care professionals at our recent conference, *Supporting Our Vulnerable Girls*.

### Young people and professionals valuing each other

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We were inspired that 40 professionals took a day of their time to support this conference.

The girls attending, who had been supported by Mentoring Plus to speak directly to the attendees and introduce a short film they had made during a programme of girls-only activities this year, told us this professional commitment felt important. "That's so good they are all coming to talk about this for a whole day."

Equally, conference goers fed back that the girls' presence introducing the conference and during group discussions was special and valuable.

"The young girls were amazing," wrote one. "Great to have the girls as part of the conference." "Really good to have young people involved and hear their points of view."

*"Really good to have young people involved and hear their points of view."*



## The content of the conference

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The conference included a keynote from research and clinical psychologist Dr Karen John, providing a backbone of rigorous theory to later discussions over differences in boys and girls, and vulnerabilities we all express.

A reminder that 'equality' is not the same as 'equity' sparked a lot of conversation: if someone has greater needs, they need more support to achieve equity than simply being treated as 'equal'.

Trainer Nicky Spencer-Hutchings then introduced the Thrive framework which is behind a growing number of in-school programmes supporting children, with a moving talk from Bristol-based teacher Laura who is implementing it currently, with special outreach needed to ensure girls were able to benefit.

Our girls had identified mindfulness sessions as a resource they would like in school, and Mentoring Plus director Jamie Luck led a practical session introducing these techniques. And professionals broke into discussion groups to explore in more depth topics our female mentees had helped us identify.

*“I found all the speakers really interesting and it was easy to take on what they were saying, quite empowering.”*



## So, what will we do differently now?

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The purpose of this whole project has been to work with the professionals who refer young people to Mentoring Plus to ensure that girls, who represent only about 25% of our referrals, are not being overlooked.

The conference aimed to bring this theme to the fore and help teachers and care workers share best practice, to feel more equipped and confident to identify and support girls in need.

*“The conference gave me opportunity to sit, listen and reflect on my own practice.”*

Every professional who refers to us, especially those in the room for the conference, has different skills, experience and resources to support girls, and we claim no special expertise except in our own work supporting community mentoring.

Here, then, is what Mentoring Plus commits to do in response to the day's findings:

- Continue to provide girls-only activities
- Include gender differences and unconscious bias more specifically in mentor training
- Refine our active listening training for staff and mentors
- Ensure young people including girls can contribute to volunteer training
- Bring in experts to offer healthy relationship insights to our girls' group
- Consult with referrers about reserving some mentoring places for girls
- Source free sanitary products for girls, left out in locations where they can help themselves unconditionally.

We'd love to hear from those who joined us for the conference what practice development commitments they took away from it, and what else they've thought about since.

We've been asked by one organisation there to support them setting up their own girls' group, and also to collaborate with Thrive on developing an adolescent development model, both exciting prospects for us.

## About the boys

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An acknowledged truth among the professionals was that when young people play out difficulties loudly or disruptively in school – more often the case with boys, though not universally – it's a situation which urgently demands to be managed for the wellbeing of the child and those around them.

"I really will look out for isolated or withdrawn girls, but what do I do with the boys I'm supporting right now?" asked one teacher.

Mentoring Plus opened its referral list in November and received a record number of referrals in just 48 hours. Just 15% were girls.

Having seen female referrals rise to 50% earlier this year in response to reminders, it's important to recognise that disproportionate demand for male referrals is still a feature of our work. And as for many other interventions, demand for all mentoring far outstrips supply.

The point of this work is not to turn away boys who would benefit from mentoring, but to ensure girls who may indicate their need for support less vocally are not overlooked, and that mentoring was equally considered as an intervention for girls if they are identified.

*The point is not to turn away boys who would benefit from mentoring, but to ensure girls are not overlooked*

## Girls need mentoring too

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From our girls' group this year, we learned that our mentees found one to one counselling intense and sometimes intimidating. Girls appreciate the slower pace and playful nature of mentoring, and were vocal in asking for this kind of support in school.

Peer mentoring, if properly supported and supervised, was seen as a valuable alternative. Time and space with a positive adult to reflect on difficulties and pursue positive interests without a script is something we can all offer in many ways.

*“Mentoring Plus has helped me much more than counselling” – Tamsin, mentee*



## And about the men...

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An unforeseen challenge this event created was that every professional who joined us was female (except for Mentoring Plus male colleagues, who felt a little outnumbered!)

The event was never described as for female attendees only, and though many professionals working with girls are female, we were struck by the lack of men in the room and what this lack of engagement may mean for girls being supported by male teachers and care professionals.



## What's next?

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We asked conference goers what they'd like to explore at a future event. Many topics were suggested; some building on work with girls to explore self esteem, sexual exploitation, self harm and giving young women a voice, others suggesting it's the turn of vulnerable boys for attention.

There was wide support for a longer day to allow more time for workshop discussions, and requests for more content in a 'training' format with expert practitioners, to meet the aim of building confidence and skills as well as sharing existing knowhow.

The quality of speakers was highly rated for this event, with 80% rating them 8 or above out of ten, and 60% rating them 10.

It was great to see that 80% of feedback respondents said they were very likely to join us for another event in future. It's testament to the value of practice development, and the commitment of our fellow professionals to learn and share knowledge.

So our final commitment is to seek support and funding to host another CPD conference on a related subject in 2018. We've got the taste for it now, and we're delighted our fellow professionals have too.

We'll be in touch with our fellow professionals and other supporters in 2018 with a date.

*"An inspiring conference."*

*"Don't leave it too long til the next one!"*

*"Thank you for a most informative and interesting day."*

## With grateful thanks to:

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- The Pilgrim Trust
- Our brave, funny and articulate Girls' Group
- The many skilled and energetic professionals who joined us for the conference, and their organisations for enabling them
- The staff and volunteers of Mentoring Plus
- The egg, Theatre Royal Bath
- All our inspiring speakers

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