

## *Practicing Purposefully*

# SOCIAL PEDAGOGY

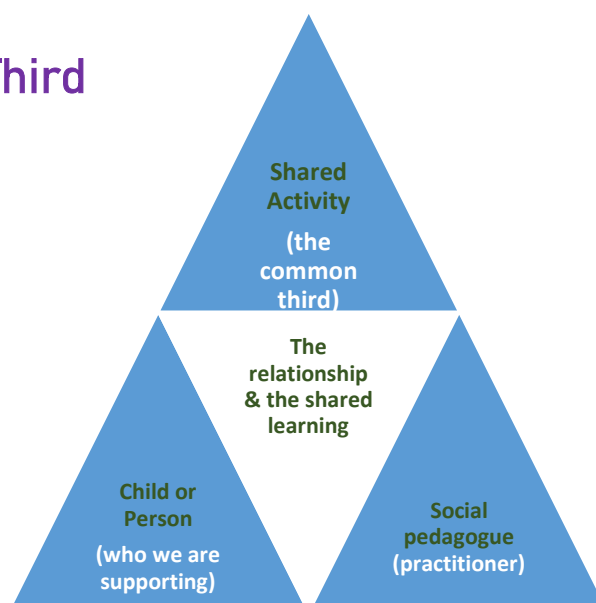
## Common Third

Eichsteller, G., & Holthoff, S. (2011) Petrie, P. (2013), Storo, J (2013)

### What is it?

Social pedagogy has developed through its long history to become an ethical, theoretical, and practical framework for education, practise, and policy. The *common third* is an establish idea in social pedagogy that creates a common, shared situation or activity between two people. This common, or shared, third thing can become a symbol of the relationship. More than just a shared activity it is a space where each person learns from the other and develops new skills together.

## Common Third



### The nature of common thirds

This is a very practical concept. It is the conscious use by the social pedagogue or practitioner of shared activities or environments to support the relationship and create opportunities to learn and develop together. It can be as simple as tying shoelaces, preparing a meal or walking or cycling in the park, through to more complex things such as planning and undertaking an adventure holiday.

The power of a collective challenge can be seen when soldiers or protesters develop deep relationships in environments of great adversity. Indeed, in all relationships doing things together and sharing space and crucially, time together are the very stuff of relationships.

Shared activities and learning are not exclusive to social pedagogy and used widely in practice. But crucially the common third requires the practitioner to plan and reflect deeply about the process. If they do not the common third becomes just another activity.

When focusing on the task rather than directly on each other it creates a more relaxed experience for both. For example, by reflecting on where the power sits in any activity, we may be able to reverse the usual power dynamic enabling the person not the practitioner, to take the lead and some responsibility. The child or person may have skills in a practical activity they can teach the practitioner. When they offer support, encouragement, and care for the practitioner the usual relationship can change and offer new opportunities for understanding.

### Why is it useful?

Our work is with people. Thus, it is essential that we can be authentic with them to build a successful relationship that enables our support to be recognised by them as something that will help them grow and develop. The common third can provide a bridge between the practitioner and the child or person being supported. It can become a learning opportunity for both while also helping to redress the inherent power imbalance.

Also, given that the activity is not directly about the person being supported, i.e., their past, their challenges, their difficulties or their plans for the future, it may better help to develop positive experiences within the relationship and build trust and enable future positive support work.

### How to apply it to practice

The common third does not necessarily need to use expensive resources but it must be child (or person) centred. We may choose an activity which is of particular interest to them or pick a moment when they are motivated to explore something new. It doesn't matter if the practitioner does not know much about the activity, as failing and learning, reflecting and developing together all exemplify the shared nature of a common third.

Consider a child or a family member that you are working with.

Think about what you know about them and reflect on what activities or environments might best be considered as common thirds that could be shared with them. Do you know the right things about them to consider this effectively? What else might you need to know? Reflect on the positives this shared activity or environment might provide. Also consider the challenges and barriers to sharing this together. Consider your own reluctance to engage in some activities. As a practitioner how can you:

- overcome any barriers
- ensure everyone remains safe
- overcome any of your own reluctance
- maximise the activities beneficial outcomes? (i.e., learning together and relationship building)

### The wheelhouse conversation

*Often practitioners recognise this occurrence in their own work. A child or person opens up about difficult issues when out on a walk or whilst being driven in a car to or from a meeting. In social pedagogy this is sometimes referred to as the wheelhouse conversation. It is an idea developed by Morten Hansen, the skipper of a boat used in work supporting young people. The arrangement of standing or sitting next to each other, both looking ahead in the same direction with the opportunity to alternate between engaging in conversation or attending to the experience ahead reduces the pressure from any form of confrontational conversation or intervention. Thus, the opportunity is created for spontaneous and free conversation. **This is the aspiration for many common third activities.***

### Criticism

The common third can all too easily be seen as just any activity done with another person. Its simplicity is part of its power, but it requires considerable planning and an awareness of the person being supported, alongside the ability to be authentic and flexible within the shared experience and reflective, both during and after, to maximise the beneficial effect.