

Practicing Purposefully

SOCIAL PEDAGOGY

Relational Universe

Eichsteller, G., & Holthoff, S. (2012) Petrie, P. (2011)
<https://www.iriss.org.uk/resources/insights/supporting-positive-relationships-children-young-people-experience-care>

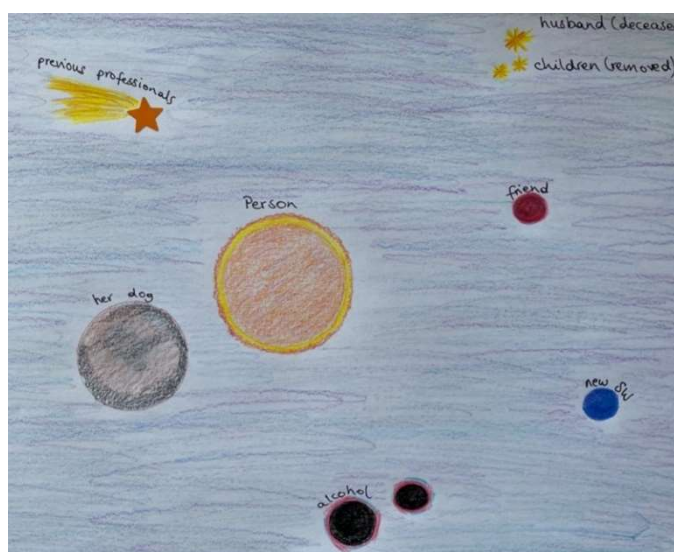
What is it?

Social pedagogy has developed through its long history to become an ethical, theoretical, and practical framework for education, practise, and policy. Social pedagogy explores almost all its support through relationship-centred practice. The relational universe model is an important concept that helps illustrate this approach in the relational life of children and families.

The universe

From a social pedagogical understanding a child or family's relational universe can provide a useful and visually stimulating framework that considers all past, current and future relationships that surround and impact on them.

Many people we support have fragmented relationships across diverse communities. Such as children in care, when they leave the care home into adulthood they often attempt to return to families and communities which may have harmed them. The exploration of this can be painful when relationships are not as ideal as expected or hoped for.



To identify these relationships early on is crucial to nurturing and establishing a supportive emotional and social network around a child or family. Such networks can become a key strength to support their move to independence or life beyond our services. Or we might call this interdependence with their own relationship universe.

Why is it useful?

There is no shortage of people appearing like a multitude of distant stars in a child or family's universe and then disappearing long before they've even become really visible. But there are also others, those who are close enough to develop a gravitational pull, who become central to their life. This is true for every person, yet what is different for children or families in crisis, is that their relational universe is often thrown out of equilibrium by decisions outside their control. This could include:

- Moving home or between parents
- Being brought into a care setting
- Placement moves resulting in loss of continuity of relationships
- School changes as well as new carers
- Limitations to family contact
- Changing workers
- Gaining or losing friends
- Etc...

The frequency with which many children (especially those in care) experience such upheaval and its potentially negative consequences makes it imperative to put greater emphasis on developing and sustaining relationships.

By mapping out this relational universe with a child or a family we can explore the world they inhabit and the relationships that may help or hinder them grow and thrive. In this mapping we can consider:

- Positive, meaningful relationships which are crucial to health and wellbeing and negative relationships which may hinder such.
- How relationships are best viewed as networks rather than linear connections
- Children and young people have a right to identity, including association and contact with their families where compatible and congruent with their best interests
- Where congruent, relationships should be preserved, respected and nurtured
- Where relationships perform positive functions, professionals need to challenge the assumption that for new relationships to form, old ones must be severed.
- Plans should provide opportunities for children to develop appropriate, affectionate relationships with their carers to meet their human needs.

In other spheres these relationship connections are termed 'social capital'. The capital resource we can find in the relationships we both support and rely on. Who do we contact if we need help to find a job, need help to move house, help with childcare or care for a pet, help preparing for an exam, help us understand a complex legal document, who would you call if you were arrested? If there someone there for all of these we have good social capital but if not, we may struggle when in crisis.

How to apply it to practice

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

If your relationship with the person is well founded, you may be able to involve them directly. Otherwise, you could do this as part of your reflections as you plan to support them. Draw out their relational universe. If you do this with them, make it appropriate: coloured pens, glue, and magazine pictures, or they might want to draw it on a digital drawing app. Etc...be as creative as the person will allow.

Ask them to think broadly about family, home, support workers, connections in all of their communities. Some friends and/or gang members might not be ideal for them, but they are in their universe and need to be included and understood.

Ask them to think about how they support and help each of these people and how they are supported by each of them. Why, for them, is this an important or a distance relationship. Have they chosen this relationship or inherited or did they have not choice (such as a care placement). Each of these conversations explores what the nature of relationships is and challenges the understanding of the benefit and potential pitfalls of relationships. These conversations also support the skills needed to find, form, and maintain 'good' relationships.

Someone relational universe is ever changing and returning to this map over time will help people understand how relationships start, evolve and end and may point to the sustainable relationships which become the crucial social capital of someone's life as they move forward.

Criticism

The model does not provide clear steps to support someone find, build, and maintain congruent, quality relationships and further support for them will be needed once their universe is understood.