

Women in the Workplace

A series by Carmel Kelly Palmer

Focusing on our children

Karen Hickey originated from and went to the local school in Derrane, Co. Roscommon. She is now married and living in County Longford and has three young children, Kevin, Ava and Kiera.

At 15 years of age she already had an interest in psychology and was doing some of her own research into the subject. She attended the Convent of Mercy Secondary School and on leaving there commenced a three-year BA Degree in Double Psychology at NUIG.

"I became aware at 15 that I was interested in psychology and began reading up on the subject. I knew then that I would like to study some area of it. After my three-year course I wanted to do a post graduate and specialise in a particular area of psychology, but I was not too sure then of what to specialise in."

"I began working with children with learning difficulties with the Brothers of Charity in Galway where I gained valuable experience of working with children and their families and I also completed a certificate in Counselling

Skills."

Karen then studied for a two-year MA in Counselling Psychology, which involved work placements and a dissertation. Counselling Psychology is a psychology speciality that facilitates personal and interpersonal functioning across the lifespan with a focus on emotional, social, vocational, educational, health-related, developmental and organisational concerns.

When she graduated, Karen took up a post with the ISPC as a Childhood Support Worker in Castlebar. This was a challenging position involving direct therapeutic work with children alongside supervising volunteers and developing services.

"I then secured a position as a basic grade psychologist in Community Care Services in Boyle, Co. Roscommon, conducting clinics in Boyle and Strokestown for children aged 0 - 18 years of age. This was a generic post, which entailed assessment and treatment of children with emotional and behavioural problems coupled with preventative group work pro-

grammes such as parenting courses and working as part of a multidisciplinary team."

"There are strict criteria relating to referral, whether it is from the GP, the crèche, the school or parents. Approval and written consent from both parents has to be in order before I have a consultation with a child. Within the age group of 0 - 18 years of age, there can be a varied and a multitude of different problems." Karen referred to these, "There are many reasons for referral, each one is different. It could be anxiety, a phobia, behavioural problems, delayed development, depression, bereavement, etc."

"I would carry out a full assessment, formulate the problem, make suggestions, explain to the child and parents what can be effective. I would also spend time building an individual's self-esteem and cementing a good relationship between myself and the child."

Adolescence, the traditional stage of development between childhood and adulthood represents the period of time during which a person experiences a variety of biological changes and encounters a number of individual issues. According to the WHO (World Health Organisation) adolescence covers the period of life between the ages of 10 and 20 years of age and is often divided by psychologists into three distinct phases, early, mid and late adolescence.

Because of various factors, change in lifestyle, society, and outside influences, young teenagers are experiencing many difficulties and it is very difficult for parents. Karen went on to talk about this particular area.

"I would see many adolescents where there could exist a childhood-related problem that has not been resolved. Young people can experience worries about exams because of high expectations. The change from childhood to becoming a young adult can affect many and in itself is quite traumatic. Young people appear to be growing up very quickly and maybe before they are quite prepared for the challenges of life. If there are any obvious signs of depression I would refer the individual on to the mental health services."

"Adolescents are exposed more now to alcohol and drugs, and there is the media



influence where they are encouraged to do more, things are pushed onto them, and they are surrounded by a multitude of outside influences. Furthermore, we no longer have the traditional family life."

Certain research has cast doubt on the traditional view that adolescence is a period of emotional upheaval. However, the fact remains that it is associated with significant biological, social-cultural, and psychological changes, and adolescents are faced with many development tasks and decisions. They have to plan for a career and modify their self-concepts, social life, and relationships with parents from those of a child to those of an adult. Because of these changes, young people are vulnerable to emotional difficulties. Although serious behavioural problems are experienced by only a minority of adolescents, few pass through adolescence without exhibiting problems in at least some areas of their lives.

Having amassed all of this experience, in 2001 Karen took up a new post in Community Care in Roscommon town, catering for children with a physical and sensory disability and for children with specific speech and language impairment.

"At that time there was the inauguration of the Junior Language Class in St Mary's Primary School which catered for children with specific speech and language impairment and which required a psychologist to complete assessments for children being

considered for their suitability for the service."

The psychologist became part of the speech and language class team and worked alongside the teacher and speech and language therapist as well as being part of the Admissions Meeting Team. This post allowed Karen to develop her knowledge of speech and language disorders and to play a role in the development of the protocols for the admissions and the criteria for assessing the children's suitability.

"The other aspect of the job involved working with children with physical and sensory disabilities such as mild forms of cerebral palsy, diabetes, cystic fibrosis, and other disabilities."

As a psychologist, Karen is very much aware of an increase in speech and language problems in very young children. What are the factors causing this phenomenon? Is it because children are now surrounded with so many play objects and are being immersed in a technological arena where a particular world is created for them? What real effects is the TV, the computer and its host of games having on the mind of a vulnerable young child? Is there a lack of interaction between parents and their child and how often now do children play together? Is a child becoming insular, in a closeted world of his or her own, fed and nurtured by technology? Karen had this to say.

"A child's world has become faster, there is much

more going on around them, perhaps impossible to embrace, and they are swept along on an ever-changing tide. Do we sometimes give a child a toy to make them happy when really what they are looking for is someone to talk to?"

In the present rushed circuit, as parents navigate the demands of daily routine, they are constantly supervising, organising and protecting and teaching their children. Research has shown that our everyday interaction with our children and the impressions they leave has an enormous impact.

Karen spoke about the importance of interaction between children and parents, "Parents have hundreds of interactions with their children during an average day. What really counts is making the most of this time, showing warmth and enjoying those daily moments with your child."

"However, parenting is a challenging task and one that requires support from society and the community. Childcare is a very important issue in the 21st century but is often overlooked in our commercially driven world. Supports for young families are not given the importance they deserve particularly in a society where the traditional support of grandparents and communities are dissolving."

Karen believes that if we are to protect our society for the future we need to focus on our children and to cater sufficiently for their developmental needs.

