Examining the impact of a therapeutic recreation programme

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The Barretstown Gang

- Founded in 1994
- Member of the Hole in the Wall Gang Camps Association
- Serves children from across Europe diagnosed with a range of serious illnesses
- Programmes run from March to November
- Based on model of Therapeutic Recreation: the use of recreational or leisure activities as a form of psychosocial intervention (Austin, 1991).
- Kiernan (2001) examined impact of Summer Camp
Programme activities

• Based on a model of
  Fun - Challenge - Success - Reflection

• Activities include
  • Arts & crafts
  • Horse-riding
  • Drama
  • Canoeing
  • Photography
  • Low & high ropes
Family Camp Programme

- Family Camp programme established in 1997
- Approx. 6 camps per year during spring and autumn seasons.
- Each camp runs for 3-4 days, over a weekend
- Each camp serves up to 15 families, each with a child diagnosed with a serious illnesses
- Not just traditional family units
- Families attend from Ireland, UK, Spain, and Germany
Aims of the research

• Examine the influence of attending Family Camp on families
• Evaluate Family Camp from families’ perspectives and develop the programme appropriately
• Provide Barretstown with a source of information for families attending for the first time
• Provide insight into the impact serious childhood illness has on the family
Plan of research

• Families attending Autumn 2003 - Autumn 2004
• Complex design (pre and post attendance) including Barretstown families and comparison families
• Quantitative measurement
  • Impact on Family Scale (Stein & Riessman, 1980)
  • Pediatric Inventory for Parents (Streisand, et al 2001)
• Qualitative interview
  • Pre-camp: Impact of illness on family & expectations of camp
  • Post-camp: Impact of attendance and evaluation of programme
• Pilot study in Spring 2003
Progress and findings to date

- Exploratory study: Interviews with key staff & families
- Staff included Programme Director, Camp Director, Child Recruitment Co-ordinator, Clinical Co-ordinator & two care staff (‘caras’)
- Key questions to staff:
  - What are aims of family programme?
  - How does the programme meet these aim?
  - What are the challenges the programme faces?
  - How do you see the programme developing?
What are the aims of the programme?

- Fun
- Allow families to spend time together
  
  “for the family to spend time together”
  “it gives .. the family a chance just to be a family again”

- Normalise the family’s experience
  
  “parents get time out .. to be adults without a care in the world .. the siblings get a chance to be siblings again .. not being the second best.. the (ill child) is allowed to be a child again.. and not to be wrapped in cotton wool”

- Provide support
How does the programme meet them?

• Safety
  “(The programme) allows them to feel safe ... in a personal and emotional sense”

• Challenge
  “you’re challenging their perceptions, for example of what the sibs and the (ill) child can and cannot do”

• Contact with other families
  “(Parent group) gets parents to meet other parents cause (in the hospital) they may have not met other parents .. So it gives them a better support network”
  “the parents build very strong bonds between each other”
Comments from parents

• Very positive about camp
  
  “It would be pretty hard to make it any better”
  “It’s so well organised like, everybody is so well organised”

• Parents enjoyed activities
  
  “You really let your inhibitions go you get stuck in and you’re like a kid again”
  “When we learnt we got the same activities that was just great ... getting to know the others it was great”

• Need to address the needs of younger children
  
  “I found the parents who had babies couldn’t really involve themselves, they couldn’t go everywhere”
Future developments

- Opportunity for cross-cultural research
- Accessing views of the ill child and his/her siblings.
- Family Bereavement Camp
- Developing the support available for families and professionals
- Continued evaluation and development of the programme
- Development of a research policy