

Abstract

Title Break-up and change
When young people with mental retardation move away from home
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Distribution Göteborg's University, Department of Social Work,
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This study is about a group of young people with mental retardation who leave home to a staffed housing facility. They grew up at a time when several large reforms within the handicap-political area led to liquidation of institutions. These youths have grown up with their families, and are expected to leave home like other young people. But contrary to other youths, their first apartment cannot be an adult-free zone, as their functional disabilities mean that they need extensive help to cope with everyday life. The purpose of the study is to examine and understand the effects when these young people with mental retardation leave their parents for an apartment of their own in a staffed housing facility. The study illuminates the interaction between the youths, their parents and the housing staff during the process of moving out, and the everyday life in their new environment. The empirical material has been collected by qualitative methods, mainly participant observations and interviews.

The housing facility consists of twelve rental apartments, one apartment for the staff, an office for the staff and common areas, which actualises how the relationship between private and public shall be regulated. In this housing facility, some institutional learning processes arise and help keeping the myth of the individual self-determination alive, in spite of the fact that the young people are subjected to collective disciplinary structures. These processes are meant to regulate how the youths should take care of their apartments, learn which the obtainable means of possible help are, and how the youths should interact in the common areas. The everyday life in their families was characterized by the fact that the youths' need of help was integrated with the social relations and the daily structure.

In the housing facility, there is a disconnection between relationship, needs of help and everyday structure, which causes the youths to seem more dependent on help than before. The staff means that this is the result of the youths lack of personal competence, while the parents think that the staff in their work takes too little consideration to the consequences of the youths' functional disabilities. Even though parents and staff represent contradictory perspectives, they still have a common point of view, which is to emphasize the importance of the practicalities of everyday life. This leads to the creation of an alliance that risks to limit the youths' possibilities to achieve an individual self-determination. But everyday life in the residential setting also offers big possibilities of community. At these occasions the youths get possibilities of new experiences, which can generate feelings of increasing personal competence. The relationship between the youths and their parents is characterised by an intense contact and mutual dependency. But parents resume the role of care keepers, when they feel that the well-being of their child is threatened. The character of mutual relationship among the youths is contradictory; it may constitute a potential for liberation and support, but also contribute to an experience of increasing vulnerability.