

State must wean children off their anti-social addiction

THE spectrum of anti-social behaviour can range from small irritations such as children playing ball in neighbours' gardens, littering and graffiti, to more serious problems such as throwing stones, breaking windows, vandalising property and verbally abusing local residents.

As individual acts, these can appear relatively minor.

However, when they are repeated over and over again, they leave residents feeling vulnerable and, in some cases, traumatised.

During the course of a three-year study of communities in Limerick, I became aware of how little is understood about children's motivations for engaging in anti-social behaviour. This lack of understanding is seriously inhibiting the effective response of the authorities at both local and national level.

As part of the 221 interviews I conducted with local residents, gardai, youth workers and community activists, I asked questions about children's motivations for anti-social behaviour.

One of the things repeatedly



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highlighted in the answers I received was the 'buzz' involved – the excitement and the 'high' generated by these experiences.

Basically, for children who are bored and in some cases, neglected, anti-social behaviour is incredibly exciting and in some cases they argue, this high is addictive.

As one youth worker commented to me: "Take the kids I work with. They're out there in these estates, they're bored and they get this colossal buzz out of doing dangerous things.

"They get a buzz from the

reaction they get out of people. Is it addictive? You bet it is."

The failure to fully understand this potentially addictive dimension to anti-social behaviour in part explains why the current government responses have had only limited success.

Addictive behaviours produce pleasure and provide an escape from internal discomfort.

The addictive behaviour pattern is characterised by the continuation of the behaviour even though those involved know there could be significant negative consequences for them.

Effective treatment programmes for addictive behaviours all stress the importance of stopping the addictive behaviour before treating the underlying causes of the addiction.

However, current Irish policy responses to anti-social behaviour all focus on treating the underlying cause of the problem without actively stopping the behaviours themselves.

Social work, youth work and family support programmes focus on problems such as neglect, addiction or abuse within the family, which contribute to

poor parenting and anti-social behaviour.

While these initiatives are very important, this approach does not involve actively stopping the behaviour itself when it is taking place in estates.

Garda diversion programmes seek to replace the buzz of anti-social behaviour with sports and community activities.

For children who are not deeply troubled this approach

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does appear to be effective.

However, for children who are more addicted to trouble-making, the high of sporting or other community activities is simply not sufficient to replace their anti-social behaviour buzz.

Criminal justice responses, such as behaviour orders which sanction the child, also appear to be ineffective.

An exclusion order currently constitutes a last-resort policy response to anti-social behaviour.

But it can take months before an exclusion order is processed and they are only applied in very severe cases.

GIVEN the level of stress generated by anti-social behaviour for residents in some neighbourhoods, there is a need for earlier and more targeted interventions.

Based on my research, it is my view that in estates where anti-social behaviour is very serious, the State has to actively stop children engaged in these activities.

This process would not necessarily have to involve

criminalising the child. However, it would involve the State actively setting a boundary on the child's behaviour when parents are incapable or unwilling to do so.

The appointment of an anti-social behaviour officer or unit to work in estates where serious problems exist would be the most effective policy response to the problem.

The task of these officers would be simply to take home children who are involved in anti-social behaviour.

If the child goes back out on the streets having been taken home, they should be taken home again and again until the pattern of addictive behaviour is broken.

In this way, the child learns that they cannot engage in anti-social behaviour.

In some severe instances, these officers may need the assistance of the gardai, but they should not be members of the police force themselves.

Only when the pattern of addictive behaviour has been broken and a clear boundary has been set do the more therapeutic responses which focus on the underlying causes of

the behaviour have any chance of being successful.

Some may say setting up a new anti-social behaviour service would be madness, given the severe budgetary situation the Government finds itself in.

However, apart from rising unemployment, the dramatic increase in local authority housing need has been the most direct outcome of the current recession.

As home repossessions continue, local authorities are facing a huge increase in demand for local authority homes while residents in some local authority estates are leaving their homes because of anti-social behaviour.

Previously stable estates are becoming destabilised because of the behaviour of minors.

Given the housing crisis facing local authorities, the question is not whether the State can afford to mount a more targeted response to anti-social behaviour but whether the Government can afford not to?

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