

# Community Mediation

*I have chosen this particular case study as it feels it portrays the many facets to conflicts that we come across here at the Perth & Kinross Community Mediation Team. The case was referred by a housing officer from a local housing association. It was a case of cross cultures, cross generations and cross (furious) relations*

A family had moved with their five children from a flat on a local estate with few, if any, safe playing areas. The children ranged from four to 14 and were as energetic and creative as a tightly knit family unit can be. They loved to play. The quiet cul-de sac they were moved into was an open plan affair, with no fences separating the individual houses with gardens and street open to all. To them, a haven of safe, spacious, play areas for their 'hide and seek', football and whatever games their imaginations could muster.

In this quiet cul-de-sac were many older residents; one of whom was in her sixties and absolutely passionate about her garden, and gardening – her flower beds were her pride and joy.

It wasn't long before frictions emerged. The children – unused to the freedom – made the most of the opportunities, playing out whenever the inclement weather allowed – but the games spilled over into the neighbour's privacy, quietness and her flower beds and after several weeks, patience's snapped and tempers flared.

With complaints firing into the housing department and the unrest, anger and animosity growing like a magical beanstalk, the case came to us at the Mediation Service.

It was clear that all involved had their stories to tell – the adults and the children. We make it our business at mediation to include all those who wish to take part, so we explained to the adults and then to the children what it is we try to achieve by getting everyone round the table to 'have their say'; how is it fair? and that everyone is important. By the end of the visits, everyone did want the opportunity to be heard and try and make things better. The Parents wished for the gardener to speak to them rather than shout at their children, the children wanted the gardener to understand that they like to play, that they are afraid of her now and that they don't mean to be in and out of her flower beds ... and the gardener wanted everyone to respect the privacy of her gardens, the quiet of the area and the hope that she can enjoy her own space without intrusion.

A meeting was set.

The adults talked first, the children were supervised with games and tasks in an adjoining room. The adults discussed the issues that had brought them to the table, spoke openly with each other about their angers and fears, explained their own perspectives and chatted about how things could be different. They drew a line, ahead of the past and planned for a future with agreements about communications and mutual supports and mutual respect.

The children were then invited in and their parents withdrew to the back of the room, acknowledging the right of their children to speak. The children asked a question of the gardener, each in turn – reading from their pre-planned cards the one thing that had concerned them, upset them, worried them the most. The gardener responded to each in turn.

The children, each in their way and to their own ability described how they loved their new home and how they loved to play but also that they had not wanted to make the gardener unhappy. The gardener explained to them all how precious her garden was to them and how much effort and time it took to make it the pretty little garden it was. Each listened to the other.

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They too drew their line, ahead of the past and made agreements about such things as how a ball would be retrieved, in what manner they were to speak to each other, how each would respect the other.

Offers were made, offers from the gardener to the smallest of the children of a patch of her garden to call her own, to plant her own flowers. Offers of visits to a local bowling club ... branches of friendship as opposed to seeds of mistrust.

They all signed their agreements with each other and agreed that we, the mediation service, would check in with them all that things were going well and that the agreement was holding.

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