



# A Background to Social Therapy Therapy and Curative Education

## **Mission statement**

Inspired by the ideas of Rudolf Steiner, Garvald Edinburgh provides services to people who have a learning disability. In striving to build community together, we recognise and value the uniqueness of each person and seek to create a quality of environment, activities and social relationships enabling people to realise their potential.

## **Statement of values**

Garvald Edinburgh offers a creative environment supporting adults with learning disability to develop skills and explore new choices and opportunities. We see everyone as an individual with a unique set of needs and abilities and believe that each person should be accepted in an open way, free from prejudice or discrimination. We believe that this enriches the wider community and all its members.

Garvald Edinburgh's approach has its roots in Rudolf Steiner's work in curative education and social therapy which began in the early 1920s. Rudolf Steiner (1861 – 1925) was an Austrian philosopher and educationalist who brought new ideas to areas as diverse as agriculture, the arts, medicine and social life. His approach to human psychology and education is based on the understanding that in every human being there is a spiritual individuality at work, creating its own destiny. Rudolf Steiner's motto of the social ethic encapsulates the principle of mutuality integral to our work:

*“The healthy social life is found  
when in the mirror of each human soul  
the whole community finds its reflection,  
and when in the community  
the value of each one is living“*

# Principles of Social Therapy as a basis for our work

The practice of social therapy has its origins in the insights of Rudolf Steiner and his understanding of human development. This paper is an attempt to identify fundamental principles underlying our work at Garvald Edinburgh. These principles are not necessarily exclusive to organisations working out of social therapy but they provide a framework within which staff can understand Garvald Edinburgh's value base and philosophy and develop their own approach to the work within that context.

In many respects the basic principles stand as ideals to which we aspire rather than strict guidelines to be followed. There is a need to be responsive to particular situations; respectful of individual choice and versatile in ones' approach and attitude. Rudolf Steiner described the challenge "to become like dancers", and that image portrays the different facets of mobility, sensitivity, skill and inner discipline. It is important also to recognise that it is the genuine striving and commitment which is of real value and not the attainment of some therapeutic ideal. Better that we struggle and learn from our mistakes than that we sit back complacently reflecting on our achievements.

The ideals behind our work are like a tapestry of interweaving threads which complement one another, and each contribute to the overall pattern. It can be hard to extricate one single thread and understand its significance in isolation, but this paper tries to separate out those strands in order to understand how the large picture is made up.

## Environment

The quality of our physical environment is of therapeutic value. The creation of an aesthetic setting, whether in a living or a work situation, is important to an individual's well-being. We believe that caring for our environment is a vital and integral part of our task in social therapy, and that attention must be paid to colour, design, the layout of a room or building; the use of natural rather than synthetic materials; the creation of order and warmth of atmosphere in a home setting or workshop; the presence of plants and flowers to bring life and inspiration into our

buildings particularly when access to open, outdoor spaces may be limited; the celebration of individuals' own creative work by using it to enhance our living and working environment.

## Attention to detail

Care for the small detail is one of the essential hallmarks of social therapy. That principle is a foundation for all aspects of the work, whether it be preparation of a meal, completion of a craft product or a conversation with another person. It is the quality of commitment to the whole process - the thoroughness and devotion to all details of the task for its own sake and not for some external reward or recognition. It is an ideal which represents integrity of purpose, and which upholds high standards and quality of work out of an intrinsic belief in their significance. The inevitable pressure to make compromises, and the daily experience of falling short of that ideal, in no way negate the value of continually re-committing oneself to caring for the fine detail of the work as well as the bigger tasks which may seem more important.

## Care of the human senses

Rudolf Steiner's picture of the human being portrays 12 senses; an image of the complexity of our sensory experience; how different aspects of our selves are formed and moulded by our relationship to the world, and how these senses interplay. Without attempting to offer a detailed exploration of these twelve senses, it is possible to indicate their importance in terms of recognising particular hindrances or blocks which an individual may experience in their relationship either to their own physical body; to the world around them, or in social relationships with other people. There are situations where we may be able to identify a helpful therapeutic response to those difficulties, but it may be equally valuable that we deepen our own understanding as a creative tool in assisting the other person's development.

One of the most vital aspects of working with Steiner's picture of the human senses is an awareness that small steps in an individual's development may be of immeasurable importance for the future. It is a perspective which sees value in caring for all aspects of the human being and which strives to foster balance when there seems to be a one-sidedness in physical, emotional or intellectual development.

Within social therapy we try to work actively with the human senses; to make the most of this potential in individual development. Through colour, touch, smell, taste and other daily experiences there is the opportunity to enrich people's lives and to bring to life powers of observation, awareness and creativity. Through movement, balance, music, speech and listening individuals may develop new capacities on an inner as well as an outer level and through the constant activity of social relationships there is the recognition and affirmation of human individuality.

## Respect for the Earth and for nature

Working and living in an urban setting can make it difficult to sustain an active connection to nature but that separation makes it all the more important that we foster an awareness of the natural world and our dependence upon it. An attitude of care and respect for the earth is seen as an important aspect of the work and therapeutic in terms of recognising the significance of healthy nutrition; the value of the natural materials which we use in producing crafts and in our working environments; and the cyclical process of life, death and renewal in the plant world throughout the changing seasons. Contemporary experience distances many people from natural sources of substance and materials which add quality and meaning to our daily lives. Within social therapy we try to foster an awareness and appreciation of those sources.

## Rhythm and balance

The value of regular routine and structure is a basis for much of our working practice. Its purpose is to provide a degree of security and predictability within which people can gain confidence, can develop skills and can establish some sense of order and control within their daily lives. Particularly for those who have a limited awareness of time the presence of a constant and reliable rhythm can be helpful as a source of orientation and certainty within a potentially disorientating world. The rhythm of day and night, work and leisure, weekday and weekend, regular working routines and holiday periods all bring elements of consistency but also of variety into people's lives. Long periods of unstructured time can bring a dullness and monotony and place heavy demands on an individual's own will forces to initiate any activity. Rhythm and balance do not need to be a prison within which all spontaneity is excluded. There is wisdom and skill in recognising the moment when routine should be abandoned; when the occasion warrants a different response and not the rigid adherence to fixed rules and structure.

## Festivals

The challenge is to bring elements of rhythm and balance into the days and weeks in ways which are alive and stimulating, and which have not degenerated into dull routine devoid of any inspiration. In celebrating the seasons and festivals of the year we believe these traditions are enriching to people's lives but that does not diminish the importance of finding ways to celebrate which are valued and meaningful in a contemporary context. Although it is the Christian festivals which provide the focus for many of our traditional celebrations it is important we respond to the diverse religious and cultural backgrounds of people with whom we are living and working.

Participation in the festivals needs to be a voluntary activity and not one imposed on adults who have the right to make independent choices about how they wish to spend their time. Some people may welcome the repetition of familiar traditions from year to year and may gain reassurance from that deepening of their experience of the cycle of the seasons; others may be keen to talk about the significance of a particular festival in their lives and find new ways to mark that occasion. It is not the numbers of people who join in with a particular activity or celebration which matter. There is a value when even one person chooses to do something special and others are free to respond if they so choose.

## Respecting adulthood

In social therapy we recognise that we are working together with adults and that our role is one of facilitator or companion, rather than teacher or parent. There is a need to accept the other person as they are and respect their individuality rather than seeking ways to change them. There may be aspects of someone's behaviour which cause concern because they cause risk to the person or to others, and other situations where we have to actively intervene, but in general we try to support an individual's own development and enable them to meet the particular challenges which they encounter in their lives.

## Mutuality

A central principle of our work and its origins is one of respect for the other person regardless of disability or the difficulties they may experience in meeting the world. There is an appreciation of the diverse capacities different individuals carry with them and a belief that, through the sharing of those complementary gifts and

abilities, each person can be enriched. In recognising the areas where a person is lacking in skill or confidence, it is important always to reflect on their strengths and the particular quality they may bring to a group or a social situation. This attitude is one which places value on non-intellectual gifts such as intuition, sensitivity and human warmth as well as the achievements and competencies which a materialistic society tends to rate more highly.

## Value of work

The value of meaningful work is an integral part of social therapy and is linked to self-esteem. Work can provide a structure and a routine helpful for many people, but it also offers the opportunity to make a contribution to the world. In producing articles of quality there is a deep sense of personal achievement, and self-confidence can grow through the realisation that one's work is valued and appreciated by other people.

In the care and devotion applied to any work task there is a spiritual significance which goes beyond the task itself or the finished product. It carries with it a healing power which is not physically tangible but which nonetheless exists and has an effect in the physical world. Similarly a task carried out carelessly or with no attention to detail is detrimental to all those on whom that work impinges.

## Community

The value of community lives in the relationships which develop between people and the qualities of trust, commitment and authenticity in those relationships. In the struggle to work creatively with the tensions and difficulties as well as the rewards of community building, there is a constant need to work on one's self as well as participate in the wider group. Without such commitment the external structure of community will have no inner strength or meaning.

At Garvald Edinburgh our community is not one based on a shared living experience. Staff are paid for the work they do and have a clear role and responsibilities to fulfil. They have a life and a home away from Garvald Edinburgh and so Garvald Edinburgh is just one of the communities of which they form a part. The same is true for many of our members who live with their families and participate in various activities locally. For others the Garvald Edinburgh community may play a very central part in their lives and be the main source of support, friendships and social interaction.

There is a power relationship between staff and members which needs to be recognised and understood if community is to develop in a genuine way. There are choices and opportunities available to one group which are more restricted for the others; there is a dependency relationship which always holds the potential for exploitation or abuse, and there is the need to look at such issues openly in order to build a community which strives to empower all of its members.

It is also crucial that we acknowledge the needs we all have which are met by community. Earning a living, offering service to others, participating in meaningful work are all important but so are the friendships, social activities, celebrations and sense of being valued as an individual. These needs are as vital for staff as for members and the well-being of the community rests upon a nurturing of the different connections and relationships which matter to people.

Of equal importance to the community we strive to build within Garvald Edinburgh are the links and interweaving connections with the wider community round about us. The value of the work is not realised when we retreat into an isolated cocoon, but when we are actively integrated in our local neighbourhoods. Welcoming friends and visitors enriches our community life. Participating in social or working activities within the wider community offers a range of opportunities, choices and new experiences, all of which may enhance an individual's development and self-confidence.

## Creativity

Our work celebrates the potential of every individual for creativity and self-discovery. Through all the activities of art, craft, music, drama and relationship we try to encourage that unique inner world to find expression.

Creativity is needed in all the activities of our daily lives. In its absence the routines and healthy rhythm will become dull and meaningless for it is only when these activities are enlivened by enthusiasm and inspiration that they can work on a therapeutic level.

## Anthroposophical medicine

The anthroposophical medical approach offers insights on illness and healing which can be helpful in our work with individuals and in our understanding of particular developmental conditions. Although we do not have the opportunity to work closely with an anthroposophical doctor we try to use anthroposophical remedies and

treatments when these are appropriate and to complement allopathic medicines. Through consultations with a visiting doctor we are able to refer some individuals for more specialist medical advice.

## Therapies

Eurythmy and speech are both available within the Centre as therapies based on anthroposophy which work with the human being as a whole person, and which bring creative energy and balance to enhance an individual's well-being. Either on an individual basis or within a group there are opportunities for people to work with movement, rhythm, and speech to develop and discover new capacities within themselves.

## Individual biography and destiny

Rudolf Steiner's perspective on the stages of human development and the significance of repeated earth lives provides rich scope for study and debate. It is not helpful to summarise those ideas in simplistic form but they are of relevance to the work we undertake within social therapy. As a starting point it is perhaps sufficient to state that the events of any human life are not seen as arbitrary occurrences but as having an inherent meaning. Their significance may lie hidden throughout a lifetime but it is important nonetheless to recognise that they fit somewhere within a much bigger picture. We cannot know what lies behind the destiny of another person but in the humility of not-knowing we can develop attentiveness to the different aspects of that person's being and try to be responsive to who they are and what the situation demands of us.

## Observation and objectivity

The significance of detail is of particular concern here again. In working together with people from a social therapeutic approach we need to pay attention to every aspect of their being - the physical, emotional and intellectual - and to study these details with a certain detachment which prevents our judgement being swayed by subjective responses. We need the clarity of objective observation if we are to understand what is being expressed through the particular difficulties a person may be experiencing, but an objectivity imbued with compassion if it is to have any therapeutic worth. It is not an abstract scientific approach seeking to dissect in order to understand, but one where there is genuine warmth of human interest and relationship.



## Self-development

The balance of inner and outer work is critical to the practice of social therapy. The path of self-awareness will be different for each one but the commitment to personal reflection and to working on one's own development is integral to this approach.

## Conclusion

These principles of social therapy should serve as a touchstone and a source of inspiration in our work. Many of the aspects described could stand as a charter for quality in our working practice and would be shared by others committed to high standards in the field of social care. There are other aspects specific to organisations working out of the ideas of Rudolf Steiner and may provoke more involved debate.

Social therapy is seen as an essential foundation for our work with people who have a learning disability. It neither seeks to diminish or to compete with the wide range of quality services now available within the wider community. The intention is to offer an alternative approach which complements and works alongside other organisations. While it is vital that we are open and responsive to new ideas, there is a value also in affirming the principles which underlie our practice and which have a significant contribution to make within this sphere of work.