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Model families: Copycat behaviour

A new approach to tackling community problems is making



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There may be little obvious connection between an unpopular Vietnamese seafood diet and reducing antisocial behaviour in a south coast English town. But in the next couple of weeks, the search will be on for parents who, like Vietnamese crab-eating children, stick out in the community because they are doing the right thing. Using a radical new approach, staff from the local community safety partnership in Gosport, Hampshire, will look for families where children behave well. The idea is to pinpoint what is different in such families – and how they can be copied by other local parents.

It's called positive deviance, and it was invented in the US. Although not widely known in this country, the idea could, according to its first UK practitioner, Jane Lewis, have the potential to deal with some of our more deeply entrenched problems in a low-cost way.

This should be music to the ears of public managers everywhere – but Lewis, a partner at Woodward Lewis management consultants who is working on the project in Gosport, warns that positive deviance is not a quick-fix approach. It requires careful work in local communities, with trained facilitators, and is a "super-local" approach, based on teasing out specific problems and answers. But it is sustainable, says Lewis, because it depends on local people working out what is best for them.

The approach was developed by the late US academic Jerry Sternin and his wife, Monique, and used by them in dealing with infant malnutrition. Even in the poorest communities they found that some children were well-nourished. The clever bit of positive deviance is not just about identifying what those children's parents did, but persuading others in the community to follow suit. In Vietnam, for instance, the parents of well-nourished children were feeding their offspring seafood, despite a general community view that such food was unsuitable for children.

By inviting other families to cook and eat with the families eating a better diet, the Sternins were able to encourage the take-up of better practices.

The appeal of this is clear – but so are the inherent difficulties. It's a bit like saying school dinners could be improved if the whole school goes round to Jamie Oliver's house for dinner. Nice – but impractical.

So how does this translate into tackling antisocial behaviour in Hampshire or, as in Lewis's previous project, helping social workers in Hertfordshire handle their workload more effectively?

"Positive deviance works best at dealing with deeply entrenched problems that have become a way of life," Lewis explains.

Some of it is about simply looking more carefully at what is actually happening. In Hertfordshire, social workers were wasting up to a third of their day being interrupted

by calls from people anxious to know how their case was being dealt with. Once identified, that problem was relatively easy to deal with, by shifting call handling to administrators and producing a system to let people know where they were in the system. Lewis says apparently complex issues like MRSA could also be tackled by similar careful observation of what people do in areas with the lowest infection rates.

But the next step is encouraging communities to work out for themselves what they need to do. This method of problem-solving only works, says Lewis, if it is owned and run by the community itself.

"Part of the issue is getting the right people in the room," she explains. That requires careful facilitation. But once trained in these skills, she says local staff, whether in the police service, the fire service or the council, can use them to help families work out what they want to fix and how to find examples of good practice.

Lewis again cautions against expecting easy answers but emphasises that this is not about blame. "When you look only at what's working, people feel empowered and hopeful."

- Jane Dudman is editor of the Guardian's Public website guardianpublic.co.uk

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