

Child protection: listening to and learning from parents

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Key points

- Research points to parents' experiences of child protection investigations and associated processes as often being unpleasant and disrespectful
- Learning from parents' experiences needs to be incorporated into everyday work if practice is to be improved
- Family group conferencing, advocacy and other person-centred and strengths-based initiatives offer opportunities for less adversarial and more constructive approaches
- Engagement with new forms of parent self-organisation, including online, and the incorporation of peer advocacy in training and in improving practice, offer opportunities to encourage positive changes at all levels

Introduction

Parents want better relationships with social workers and respect and professionalism from those working with their family (Buckley, Carr and Whelen, 2011)

The value of participation by service users in shaping and improving practice and services is well recognised in much existing guidance and practice, but less so in relation to contact with families of children referred on child protection grounds. This *Insight* uses the evidence base to help explore how we can learn from parents whose children have been referred, in order to avoid causing harm and provide the best and most helpful support.

Involuntary engagement

Social work with children and families has become increasingly dominated by child protection (Parton, 2014) and this has resulted in families having more involuntary engagements (when contact has not been sought by the family) with services. The work of supporting families to overcome social, emotional, economic and physical adversity has been marginalised by risk assessment, monitoring

and surveillance. In addition, there is an expectation that families will accept and co-operate with child protection investigations (Devine and Parker, 2015; Bilson and Martin, 2016).

Over the last 15 years there has been a UK-wide continuing upwards trend in the number of child protection referrals and investigations of families (Devine and Parker, 2015; Bilson and Martin, 2016). When the Scottish figures for referral were last

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published in 2009/10, the number of referrals had risen from 6,000 in 2000/01 to 13,000 (Scottish Government, 2010). If this trend continued at the same rate, over 18,000 children in Scotland will have been referred in 2016 alone. This would represent one in every 50 (2%) children under 16 years old in Scotland in 2016. As most children referred for child

protection are under 11 years old, the percentage of younger children referred may be found to be as high as 5% or one in 20. In Scotland, the Getting it Right for Every Child national practice model has introduced processes for sharing concerns about children's 'wellbeing' and holding multidisciplinary 'child concern' meetings. The number of child wellbeing concern meetings is not gathered or reported systematically, and there has been limited study of their outcomes and impacts.

Research suggests that parents' experiences of social work intervention are often unpleasant and unhelpful

Thus, in Scotland, as in England and Wales, a growing number of parents have or will experience referral and investigation on the grounds of child protection concerns. However, despite the growing number of families who are being referred and investigated, there has so far been little acknowledgement by social work and partner agencies of the impact of

imposing intrusive investigations on the families concerned (Devine and Parker, 2015; Featherstone, Morris and White, 2014).

What do we know about parents' experiences of child protection?

The paper, *Engaging parents in child protection* provides an overview of research in this area, and suggests that parents' experiences of social work intervention are often unpleasant and unhelpful (Smithson, 2015). The overview includes a number of relatively recent studies that have found that parents in child protection processes feel:

- They are not given enough information on the process, and do not have time to read and reflect on reports. The process is also viewed as focusing on family weaknesses rather than strengths (Ghaffar, Manby and Race, 2012).
- They have different perceptions to the professionals involved of what needs to change in their family, and do not see child protection as a joint process, but one they must adhere to. Parents want better relationships with social

workers and respect and professionalism from those working with their family (Buckley, Carr and Whelen, 2011).

- There is a strong power differential between parents and professionals. Practitioners should consider their working style and use of power, and how this will be perceived by parents (Dumbrill, 2006).

In the *Review of child protection in England*, commissioned by the Department of Social Services, Professor Eileen Munro highlighted a growing imbalance in child protection work, with a focus on technical solutions, rules and procedures, rather than recognition of the importance of the skills to engage with families. She considered that the emphasis should instead be on 'building strong relationships with children and families with compassion' (Munro, 2011, 1.29) and on a more reflective practice. Devine and Parker found that when agencies were involved in investigations there was 'very little recognition or awareness of the stresses experienced by families as a result' (2015, p2).

In *Reimagining child protection*, contemporary critics Professor Brid Featherstone and colleagues, criticise

what they describe as 'muscular authoritarianism' in child protection work (Featherstone, White and Morris, 2014). This approach, they argue, favours direction and instruction of parents over relationship-based engagement, to the detriment of children and their families. Echoing Munro's call for relationship building and compassion, the authors call for family focussed and humane practice, which understands children as rational and accords parents respect and recognition.

The recommendations of two recent separate Scottish Government reports on child protection; *It's still everyone's job* (Scottish Government, 2017a) and *The Child Protection Improvement Programme in Scotland* (Scottish Government, 2017b) recognise the importance of parent and family participation. However, unlike the Munro Report in England, the recommendations do not extend to changes in social work practice, and instead, focus on parent and child participation solely at the point of decision making at hearings and at child protection case conferences. As the Bilson and Martin (2016) and Devine and Parker (2015) studies show, very few families referred and investigated will go to either a hearing or a case conference, so there needs to be a focus on their experiences.

What does research tell us about involving parents in practice?

A WithScotland¹ briefing paper, *Involving parents in assessment and decision making*, provides a comprehensive summary of existing knowledge, resources and research on involving parents, with a particular emphasis on parents with learning difficulties.

The authors remark that ‘despite a relatively substantial body of research on parents’ experience of participation in assessment and decision-making, there is less on specific practice mechanisms to facilitate engagement’ (McGhee and Hunter, 2010, p1). This relative lack of research knowledge on practice mechanisms points to a need for critical examination of existing practice. It should be noted that parents being judged to be ‘non engaging’ is specifically described as a risk factor pointing to a potential need for compulsory or emergency measures (Scottish Government, 2010a).

This briefing argues that the lack of a knowledge and skills practice base for social workers, and others investigating concerns, puts parents and children at risk of unnecessary compulsion and even of unnecessary and harmful removal of their children. Social workers and others working in child protection should, therefore, reflect on their practice and consider how it might be improved.

Formal processes for participation

The WithScotland briefing recognises family group conferences (FGCs) as one mechanism for engagement. FGC is an internationally recognised model for engaging families in decisions and planning for children. Originating in New Zealand, it is practised in a number of European and other countries. The Institute for Restorative Practice provides a comprehensive account of its origins and of research (Mirsky, 2003). This refers to evidence from New Zealand that service providers and practitioners, while paying lip service to engagement, had to be instructed by law to include families in decision making. This was achieved by the mandatory introduction of FGCs in order to ensure

¹ WithScotland, the national centre for child protection was closed in mid-2016 when government funding transferred to CELCIS.

family involvement as a right in crucial life-changing decisions (Doolan, 1999).

The Family Rights Group (FRG), which works mainly in England, advocates for FGCs as the best way to involve parents and wider family in decision making (FRG, 2012). It provides substantial information on their website about the service, its outcomes, and training. Children 1st in Scotland developed and published national standards for FGCs in Scotland in 2007 (Scottish Executive, 2007), which have been revised in 2015 to incorporate recent legislation. These are available online (Scottish Family Group Conference Steering Group, 2015).

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The recent Scottish Government child protection review (2017b) points again to the potential advantages of the FGC model in use in several local authorities, drawing on research published in 2014. The review recognises the benefits of the model in engaging with the family group in order for them to make plans to keep children safe. This research reaffirmed FGC as strengths-based, and as promoting partnership between state and families (Frost et al, 2014).

Several authorities have also purchased the Signs of Safety® programme which ‘aims to work collaboratively and in partnership with families and children to conduct risk assessments and produce action plans for increasing safety and reducing risk and danger by focusing on strengths, resources and networks that the family have’ (Bunn, 2013, p7). East Lothian Council adopted this model for working with families and attribute that to the halving of numbers of children on the child protection register in 2015/16 (CELCIS, 2016).

A criticism, or reservation, that might be levied at FGCs, Signs of Safety® and other practice models for involving and engaging with parents, is that such initiatives are largely professionally led, and may underestimate the suspicion of statutory social

workers' powers and consequent resistance to these (Gallagher and Smith, 2010; Beresford, 2016).

Evidence-informed suggestions for improving practice

- **MEET WITH PARENTS IN STRUCTURED INDIVIDUAL AND GROUP DISCUSSIONS ABOUT HOW THE SERVICE YOU PROVIDE MIGHT BE IMPROVED**

Arranging systematic group and one-to-one meetings for parents who have had recent experience of referral and investigation might allow teams of practitioners to reflect on their practice, and improve or mitigate any harmful or negative impact of these on parents and their children. A study of the impact of inviting parents, social workers and foster carers to group meetings found, among other impacts, that 'Supportive relationships with peers, foster parents and social workers can represent a vital supplement to individual services, not only for the impact for the group members, but also for changes in agency policies and services' (Slettboe, 2011, p15). The group meetings brought about some positive changes in foster care services, but also changes in social workers'

attitudes to parents. An important finding was that the provision of information through this group process was in itself empowering and that a 'Lack of information seems to be a vital factor that prevents parents from participating as partners in the protection services' (Slettboe, 2011, p15).

- **PROVIDE PARENTS WITH ADVOCACY TO ENSURE THAT THEY ARE ABLE TO EXPRESS THEIR VIEWS AND BE ASSURED THAT THESE ARE RESPECTED AND TAKEN SERIOUSLY**

Direct advocacy also has a role to play in supporting parents' involvement. An online Family Rights Group (FRG, n.d.) protocol for advocacy in child protection explains that 'When applied in a child protection context we suggest that, without compromising the safety of the child, the core goal of advocacy is twofold: to empower parents to participate in the child protection process from an informed position, speaking for themselves wherever possible; and to promote good communication and a positive working relationship between the parents and the local authority' (Linley and Richards, 2002, p4). The Family Rights Group has also produced an advice sheet for families who are looking for support in having their voice heard

in formal and informal contacts and meetings (FRG, n.d.). The Scottish Independent Advocacy Alliance has published guidance for advocacy for families at risk which has been endorsed by the Scottish Government (SIAA, 2014).

- **ENGAGE WITH PARENT-LED INITIATIVES**

Being willing to support and welcome parent and family led representation on the quality of service offered is one way that agencies can open themselves to challenge, demonstrate willingness to be accountable to parents and families, and from this, learn and make changes. An initiative in New York, which introduced parent organisation and representation to the city welfare provision, provided a successful challenge to high rates of intervention and care. *From pariahs to partners* (Tobis, 2013) is an account of parent engagement in child protection and care. A reduction in the number of children in care and improvements in case work practice are attributed to the introduction of a system of paid, parent peer-to-peer advocacy which has been accepted and established within state and other agencies providing care and

protection services. An Edinburgh parent-led initiative, PAR (Parent Advocacy and Rights), was formed in the wake of a group of parents hearing from David Tobis on a visit to Scotland in 2015. The group has been running for a year and has been invited to speak to practitioner forums and conferences, social work students, seminars, and to meet with other parent groups. It is hoped that a Scotland-wide, parent-led conference will be held in 2018 to promote and influence improvements in services.

- **USE OF THE INTERNET AND SOCIAL MEDIA TO LISTEN TO AND ENGAGE WITH PARENTS**

Widespread access to the internet has helped share information (and sometimes misinformation), and to promote self-help and peer-to-peer advice, advocacy and support. Parent-led organisations and campaigns are easily found online. However, as yet, there is little apparent attempt to respond to or engage with these new forms of citizen's organisations in an effort to improve practice or policy. These and other similar organisations are useful sources of information, and support contact with organised parent initiatives.

Examples of independent parent-led organisations and/or initiatives:

- Families in Care is a self-help advocacy and representation group in Newcastle upon Tyne.
WEBSITE: www.familiesincare.com
 - Families Need Fathers provides advice and support to fathers who are seeking contact with their children, or to enhance their role in their children's lives, including where child protection or child care processes are engaged.
WEBSITE: www.fnfscotland.org.uk
 - Legal Action for Women hosts bi-weekly work meetings and puts women in touch with each other, opening the possibility of women exchanging experiences and advice. Women work with others but always keep the power of decision-making in their own hands in a process of collective self-help.
WEBSITE: www.legalactionforwomen.net
 - Mothers Apart from their Children. Members are mothers who are apart from their children as a result of, among other reasons, children having been fostered, taken into care, or adopted, or the mother is in prison.
WEBSITE: www.matchmothers.org
- Parents Advocacy and Rights is an Edinburgh-based parent-led group seeking to support parents in care, child protection, children's hearings and other situations where they have lost care of their children, or risk losing care. Many parents and their children feel that they are the last to be heard whenever social work, health or education get involved in their lives. They believe that parents and families need help to be heard and that social workers and others need help to listen and to make respectful relationships with parents, along the principle of 'no decisions about us without us'.
WEBSITE: <https://parparentsadvocacyrights.com>
 - Safeguarding Survivor is a blog by a parent with extensive experience of child protection processes, including the removal of her sixth child at birth and her (successful) fight to be reunited with him. She has a very specific aim: 'The purpose of this Blog is to inform, support and advise all of those involved in the UK Child Protection Process from the unique perspective of a parent who has experienced, negotiated and survived'.
WEBSITE: <http://survivingsafeguarding.co.uk>

Implications for practice

Developing and changing practice in what has become the dominant purpose of contact between social workers and families today is necessarily an explorative activity, and one that requires an enquiring and learning approach. The following suggestions are made with this in mind. They are also not costly and can be put into place quite quickly. Practitioners and managers need to take responsibility for generating knowledge and improving practice, by developing their own reflective and critical practice and encouraging this in others.

INDIVIDUAL PRACTITIONERS

Actively seek feedback from parents about practice and the impact of practitioner involvement on them and their quality of life. How well or badly are communications received? Is the practitioner trusted to do what you they say they will? To be honest and sensitive? To put children's interests before their own or the agency's and to challenge practices that cause harm and distress? Use the messages from this in individual supervision and in developing changes and improvements in practice within teams.

PRACTICE TEAMS

Actively and routinely seek input and feedback from parents about local practice and service delivery. Make parents aware of how their views and experiences can be involved in improving the experience for themselves and for others. Consider what practices need to change or improve. Consider how wider policy change and professional development in the agency may be supported by what the team learns from working with parents.

DIRECTORS AND LEAD MANAGERS

Encourage parents' comments and complaints. Actively collaborate with parents' organisations, academic and advocacy interests to ensure that there are effective and ethical methods for seeking parents' views and experiences, and acting on these in ensuring that agency policies and practice

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improve. Ensure that parents are made aware of ways of being heard and influencing change, and that staff training needs in this area are identified and met. Ensure that all complaints are fairly and independently dealt with and that learning from complaints is fed back across the whole agency.

LOCAL AUTHORITY ELECTED MEMBERS

Provide leadership and governance. Ask for reports of citizens' experiences of child protection and care services provided by the authority. Invite parent and community groups to present to committee meetings (this can be in private). Consider the development of 'parents' charters' or similar to ensure parents are aware of the standard of service they should experience and how their views and experiences can inform and influence service provision and practice more generally, and influence the kind of services that are funded.

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