



NCRC / NSPCC / Leeds Metropolitan University Joint Partnership Research Project

**Exploring the Experiences of Parents and Carers
whose Children have been subject to Child
Protection Plans**

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Executive Summary

Background

- (i) The NSPCC (North Division) and the Nationwide Children's Research Centre (NCRC) agreed to promote research exploring the experiences of parents / carers who had substantial experience of involvement in the Child Protection system, in 2007. Three Safeguarding Boards in West Yorkshire agreed to participate in the research. The NSPCC seconded an experienced practitioner to the NCRC part-time for twelve months from April 2008, to take a lead role in the research. Assistance was provided by a senior lecturer from Leeds Metropolitan University and the director of the NCRC.
- (ii) A model ethical approval process was negotiated through Leeds Metropolitan University's Ethics Committee.
- (iii) Parents who had had been removed from Child Protection lists in the year prior to April 2008, were eligible to take part. Participants received shopping vouchers to the value of £20 following completion of interviews.
- (iv) A qualitative research methodology was adopted, using recorded semi-structured interviews, later transcribed. The data was analysed using the N-Vivo software package.
- (v) Parents were contacted initially by staff members who had worked with them.
- (vi) A total of 42 interviews involving 47 adults were completed across the three Authorities.

Literature Review: Key Themes

- (vii) Research literature has highlighted the challenge of attempting to work in partnership in the context of child protection / safeguarding children.

- (viii) The treatment a family receives is likely to determine the extent to which a family will co-operate with agencies, and this in turn will impact on the agencies' ability to adequately monitor the well-being of vulnerable children in the family.
- (ix) Service users have expressed variable levels of satisfaction with professionals, and with interventions received.
- (x) Perceptions of professionals' power are a key variable in service users' reactions to interventions.
- (xi) The literature has highlighted the significance of the professional style and attitude (of workers) in determining responses to interventions. Parents value empathic approaches by workers, and the ability to make and sustain relationships with both parents and children.
- (xii) Services for victims, of domestic abuse are generally in response to children's, rather than victims' needs.
- (xiii) Professionals often have unrealistic expectations of non-abusing mothers, who may be left to protect their children themselves.
- (xiv) Research suggests that social workers have little confidence in working with men and therefore are not able to divert child care responsibility away from mothers.
- (xv) Messages from Research (DoH, 1995) demonstrated that the most effective outcomes were achieved in child protection cases where there was a shared understanding of concerns between professionals and parents or carers, and agreement about the best way to safeguard and promote the welfare of children.

Descriptive Statistics for Research Participants

- (xvi) Thirty-six of the 42 participants were white British; 5 were British Asian; and 1 was Dual-Heritage.
- (xvii) Twenty-three of the participants were registered for *Neglect*; 9 for *Physical Abuse*; 6 for *Sexual Abuse*; and 4 for *Emotional Abuse*.

- (xviii) Thirty-nine of the participants were female, and 8 were male.
- (xix) Three of the parents said they had disabilities; and 11 of them had a child with a disability. More participants described their health as *average* or *poor*, than those who described their health as *good*.
- (xx) Thirty of the parents described support being available for them from their extended families; and 10 said such support was not available to them.

Analysis of Interviews

Parents' Views of Actions taken by Agencies

- (xxi) Nearly half the parents (N = 19) agreed at the time, or with hindsight; with the decision to make their child subject to a CP Plan; five disagreed, but acknowledged professional concerns; twelve disagreed with the decision.
- (xxii) Evidence received indicated that in the process of working with professionals, parents and carers came to understand the role and responsibilities of agencies better, some parents recognised the benefits from being involved in the Child Protection system.
- (xxiii) Overall, parents / carers had mixed views about whether the Child Protection Plan made a positive difference to their family. The highest number (N = 18) felt the Plan **had** made a positive difference to their family. Another group (N = 14) did not know whether the Plan had made a difference. Some (N = 6) did not feel the Plan made a difference, or made things worse. A small group (N = 4) could not remember a Plan being drawn up.
- (xxiv) Some families saw Child Protection Plans as a way to access support, and some as a means by which children could be protected, particularly in families who were subject to domestic abuse.
- (xxv) A number of participants overcame initial resistance and negotiated effective working arrangements with Safeguarding professionals.

(xxvi) Some parents misusing drugs or experiencing domestic abuse were motivated to seek support and to make significant changes in their lives when their child was made subject to a Child Protection Plan.

Information

(xxvii) Many participants said that they did not receive clear or sufficiently full information when first involved with Child Protection agencies. Absorbing information was particularly difficult at this stressful juncture. Confusion was particularly evident for parents where there had been allegations of sexual abuse concerning their children.

(xxviii) Parents' perceptions of the quality of the information they were given tended to improve as relationships with professionals became better established.

Case Conferences

(xxix) Most (37 / 42) families described attending Case Conferences as intimidating, confusing, or stressful. Most found it difficult to express their point of view. Five parents described attending the Conference as a positive experience.

(xxx) Most parents found the number of professionals attending Case Conferences daunting. Reasons for some agencies and representatives attending were not always clear; and sometimes key agencies were missing.

(xxxi) Participants had serious concerns about not having sufficient time to read reports written about them for Case Conferences. Some parents commented on the lack of positive content in the reports; and some had concerns about their widespread distribution to agency representatives.

(xxxii) Participants commented very positively on the quality of chairing of Case Conferences.

(xxxiii) The research found positive evidence of parents actively working in partnership with professionals in Core Group meetings. Parents felt much more able to contribute in them, linked to smaller numbers of professionals attending, and their tending to be known to the families.

Assessments

- (xxxiv) Some participants considered that assessments were made on the basis of insufficient contact with them and their children.
- (xxxv) A small number of families (N = 5) could not recall an assessment taking place.
- (xxxvi) A small number of participants (N = 4) acknowledged that they concealed information from the Authorities, for fear of the consequences.
- (xxxvii) Some (N = 10) participants commented that assessments and other reports written about them failed to reflect any positive qualities in the family. By contrast, where positive progress was acknowledged by professionals, participants had felt greatly encouraged.
- (xxxviii) Participants (N = 11) strongly criticised social work agencies when they were not given enough time to read Assessment and Case Conference reports.
- (xxxix) Evidence from a small number of participants (N = 4) suggest that they were complying with professionals, whilst not necessarily engaging in the process of assessment and subsequent interventions.

Consultation with Families

- (xli) Similar numbers of parents felt they were consulted and involved in decisions (N = 18), and did not feel they were consulted (N = 17). A smaller number (N = 6) felt they had limited influence on decision making, but still felt respected and listened to.
- (xlii) Over half the parents interviewed (N = 24) felt either very positive or fairly positive about the process of consultation, while two-fifths (N = 17) of the sample had negative experiences of consultation.

Agencies Working Together

- (xliii) Most parents (N = 31) were clear about the roles of different professionals involved with them whilst their children were subject to a Child Protection Plan.

- (xliii) Out of the 11 families who were confused about the roles of professionals, six had children subject to a Child Protection Plan due to sexual harm.
- (xliv) Nearly two-thirds (N = 27) of families rated inter-agency communication as good or very good.

Style of Professional Response

- (xlv) Three-quarters (N = 32) of families were able to identify one professional with whom they had formed a positive working relationship.
- (xlvi) The qualities of professionals that participants particularly appreciated included straightforwardness, honesty, and a child-centred approach. Practical support and time spent with families was also much appreciated.
- (xlvii) A smaller group of families, including some whose children had been involved in allegations of sexual abuse, said that they had experienced little empathy or support from social workers.
- (xlviii) Some participants who had experienced domestic violence had felt unsupported by social workers.
- (xlix) A small group of parents (N = 7) felt stigmatised, for example because their children were subject to a Child Protection Plan, or because of past experience of domestic violence or drug abuse, or because of inappropriate comments made by professionals.
- (l) A large group (N = 19) of families commented on the number of different social workers they had had, and the difficulties caused by changes in social worker. Participants also commented on variation in the standard of service received depending on the qualities of the social worker involved.

Parents' Views of Support Services

- (li) Twenty-four families reported either a very effective package of support from a number of different agencies and / or high levels of support from one worker.

Thirteen families reported a poor level of support. Nineteen families identified gaps in the services they were provided with.

- (lii) Twelve families described positive support from school; three families reported difficult relationships with schools.
- (liii) Five families identified a lack of practical or financial support while children were subject to Child Protection Plans.
- (liv) Twenty-five families identified domestic abuse as a feature of the family background. Children in these families had witnessed or experienced domestic violence. Six children from four families had been given support in addressing the impact of the violence on them. Five families raised concerns about lack of direct work with children.
- (lv) There are some examples in the study of good practice with women who had experienced domestic abuse. The research findings also suggest that professionals need to give further consideration to the aftermath of living in situations of domestic abuse for both women and children, and to recognise where there is a need for ongoing therapeutic support.
- (lvi) Eighteen parents had experienced difficulty in managing their children's behaviour; only five of them reported receiving good levels of support to address this.
- (lvii) Twenty-five families identified parental mental health as being a factor in their background. They received mixed levels of support in addressing these issues.
- (lviii) Little evidence was found of therapeutic work being undertaken jointly with parents and children together.

Issues Impacting on Parents

- (lix) In half the families (N = 21), drug and alcohol misuse was the main cause, or a contributing factor, in the decision for children to be made subject to a Child Protection Plan.

- (lx) In thirteen of these families, positive outcomes were recorded. This group of parents had received positive and effective support from both Safeguarding agencies and specialist Drug and Alcohol services. A small group of parents (N = 5) provided negative feedback about drug and alcohol services.
- (lxi) Out of the twenty-five families who had experienced domestic abuse, six received good levels of support; and eleven reported feeling unsupported in relation to domestic abuse, or fearful of seeking help. Some women felt that they were blamed for the abuse that they had experienced.
- (lxii) Families had mixed experiences of support for mental health issues: 8 received good levels of support and well co-ordinated services; 6 reported poor co-ordination between services, or accessed their own support; 6 parents reported that they received no support with mental health problems.
- (lxiii) Fifteen families had either an adult or a child with a disability, or a significant health problem. Twelve of them had access to the support and help they needed; three felt they did not have this support.
- (lxiv) Eighteen parents identified children's behavioural problems having a significant impact on their ability to parent. Five of them felt they had received appropriate levels of support. In the other eleven cases, parents had either not received help addressing problems of the child's behaviour (N = 8), or had not received support with their parenting needs (N = 3). Two parents did not express a view.
- (lxv) A small number of parents (N = 7) described how their own experiences of abuse as children had impacted on their parenting. The parents felt that this could result in their being perceived more negatively by Safeguarding agencies.
- (lxvi) Seventeen parents described experiencing financial problems impacting adversely on their parenting. Only a minority of these parents were referred to agencies who could help them with their finances.
- (lxvii) Most families were happy with their accommodation; just four families spoke about housing problems affecting their parenting.

- (lxviii) Concerns arising from the small number (N = 6) of cases where children had alleged sexual harm included non-abusing mothers feeling blamed by professionals; lack of recognition for stress experienced by parents; and lack of support for parents to help them address the impact of abuse on the child, and subsequent behavioural issues.

What Services Could Do Differently?

- (lix) Parents most commonly suggested that Safeguarding agencies needed to provide clearer information about safeguarding procedures, and more information about plans for working with families.
- (lxx) Parents also suggested that safeguarding agencies needed to spend more time with families, to increase contact, and to spend time getting to know families before preparing reports.
- (lxxi) Parents also suggested improvements in openness and honesty from professionals. They also requested more joint work with children and parents, professionals following through on delivering services agreed at Core Group meetings, and professionals accepting that parents can change.