Using The Signs of Safety Approach in Child Protection Case Conferences in East Lothian

Anne Beattie, East Lothian Council  Email: a.beattie@eastlothian.gov.uk

Family Feedback
19 Family members participated.
85% said they were well prepared for the meeting but:
• 15% said they did not feel brave to share their views
85% said they had an opportunity to express their views:
• 5% the chair put out the wrong message
85% of the children felt the chair spoke for the children.
85% of their views were listened to:
• 5% it was a two-way process
75% said they felt respected during the meeting:
• 25% Said to feel judged, this meeting didn’t judge and improved my confidence.
• “Ununderstood issues, everyone bettered down for me”
• “Wearing listened to”
85% said the risks/dangers were discussed fairly:
• “Risks made clear, helpful having it written down on the wall”
• “Very clear meeting was about the children”
85% said they felt the child protection plan will help things change for the better:
• “It made a big difference”
75% said they felt more confident:
• “I feel more confident about the plan agreed with the parents”
75% said that the right people were at the meeting but:
• 25% said there was too much people whose views were not heard
85% felt that the child protection plan was an improvement:
• “25% said that the meeting was too short noticed for everyone to attend
How can we improve the approach?
• Reports are sent out in time.
• Professional need to be well prepared
• System needs to be better linked, so everyone has up to date information.

Professional Feedback
56 individuals returned the feedback form:
80% said they felt prepared for this new approach to case conferences
Those who did not felt, for a variety of reasons not had the ability to take advantage of training / awareness opportunities.
100% said they had an opportunity to express their views:
• “There was more discussion rather than each worker giving a report”
• “Everyone had the opportunity to talk – much less formal atmosphere than previous EPPC”
95% said that the children were adequately discussed:
• “Each child is discussed fully and shared in equal input”
• “Issues were fully discussed and explained in straightforward language”
95% said they felt that the child protection plan was robust:
• “Clear agreement from partners and family regarding who do what”
• “Family had the opportunity to contribute to plan”
• “Having a confidentiality plan on the same piece of paper that was discussed is a big improvement for the family to see the plan”
95% said that the family were given an opportunity to express their views:
• “Family were more able to express their views in a calm manner without feeling defensive then under the old system”
• “They were specifically addressed and asked their views”
• “The focus was on the family leading the discussion with structured support from the chair”
• “The chair conducted the meeting in such a way that the family took the lead in many ways, usual not the case”
• “Participants were asked how does the signs of safety approach compare with the former approach”
• “The process is important to identify support and resources and the next step of the meeting involves the consultation of the chair”
• “It helps address some of the power balance between professionals and families. It empowers families to become more confident in identifying and discussing possible professionals instead of feeling things are imposed”
• “Much more interactive, plan felt alive”
• “It felt like family were the most important contributor”
• “Gather to listen and address all the salient points and know that they have been given more ability to the family to talk”
• “Opportunity for family to speak with professionals rather than having to report to people being read out”
• “More open and honest”
• “Clearly the focus was on the needs of the child and what is required to keep them safe”
• “More child focussed”

Where Does This Fit In?
The Strengthening Families Framework/Signs of Safety approach to Child Protection Case Conferences was initially developed and has been used in West Berkshire since 2001. Several other English local authorities have since implemented this model.

Issues that have been identified have been:
• The lateness and sometimes absence of reports
• The length of the meeting takes
• The need for the preparation for the new approach for family members
• The importance of training is the new approach for professionals
• The importance of the caseworker involvement at the conference
• The contribution to the decision making for family members
• The importance of family members feeling more involved in the conference and able to have a say
• Family members feel more respected

Where to Now?
East Lothian Council, taking into account research and the experiences of local authorities in England adopted the Strengthening Families Framework/Signs of Safety approach to meet local requirements. The Signs of Safety Approach was introduced on 4 April 2016 for initial Child Protection Case Conferences.
Feedback from professionals and family members has been very positive. It has to be recognised that this approach is not an easy option for either professionals or family.

Issues Identified:
Preparation is essential:
The Chair visits the parents/carers prior to the conference to explain the process and discuss the “danger assessment”.
Children’s Rights supported by involving extended family, who are involved - in spite of this, social workers have a much bigger role than with traditional case conferences. It was agreed that East Lothian Council would adopt the ‘Street Team’ approach (there is no Timescoping) but continue, during the implementation, to work to 28 days from referral to Case Conference. Workers are aware of the importance to workload and will work as full time role.
Reports must be provided in good time to allow professionals and family members the opportunity to read them prior to the meeting.
Training/preparation for professionals is essential. There is a rolling programme offered to all involved agencies and workers need to take responsibility for using these opportunities.