

ABSTRACT

Key messages from research show that Child Protection Case Conferences tend to be professionally dominated; parents are passive and 'tested' for co-operation; there is insufficient time spent on planning. Family members find Case Conferences traumatic, they feel judged, frightened and excluded, - they do not feel listened to; they feel powerless and do not believe they get the help they need.

Therefore Case Conferences should:

- Have a greater focus on planning; enable families to present their views; ensure all views are grounded in evidence; place a strong emphasis on relationships; reduce power inequalities and build on strengths.

In keeping with messages from research, East Lothian Council decided to implement the Signs of Safety approach for Initial Child Protection Case Conferences in April 2013 to find a more constructive way of working with families and address these issues, in partnership with other involved agencies.

The aim of this research project is to consider the views of family members and professionals regarding the Signs of Safety approach to Case Conferences and whether they believe that the approach is likely to lead to better outcomes for children and young people. 25 Case Conferences were included in the study, 56 professionals from various agencies such as health, police, education as well as social work, provided feedback forms. 14 family members provided feedback forms and 4 took part in interviews. Feedback from both professionals and family members was overwhelmingly positive about the Signs of Safety approach. Case Conferences were felt to be more inclusive, with everyone being given an opportunity to have their say – including family members who reported feeling listened to and respected. Family members and professionals reported that they felt all the risks were discussed fairly and were hopeful about the plans.

This was a small scale study, time limited, and therefore could not consider the impact on children, young people and their families. It looked only at the effect of the approach on the actual meetings.

Signs of Safety is not about procedures and processes but about ways of working in a more positive, collaborative yet realistic and transparent way with families, clearly identifying concerns and risk. The findings of this research project show that it is an approach which does complement the views and messages from research, including Munro; current Scottish legislative requirements and policy documents such as GIRFEC.

East Lothian has now implemented the Signs of Safety approach for all Child Protection Case Conferences and sees this as a first step towards implementing the approach more widely in practice.