

Henderson L., Dunn B. (2013) *The role of the wider family with children on Edinburgh's Child Protection Register.*

A small scale practitioner research project to find out in what ways social workers have tried to involve 'wider family' members, and where 'wider family' members have been involved, what has been the perceived impact? November 2013

Lesley Henderson, Senior Practitioner and Becky Dunn Social Worker, Children and Families' Practice Team, The City of Edinburgh Council

Mentoring guidance was provided by Gary Clapton, Lecturer in Social Work, School of Social and Political Science, University of Edinburgh.

Executive Summary

This research was proposed against the backdrop of the researchers' experiences as practitioners in a children and families' practice team for the City of Edinburgh Council. Anecdotal evidence as well as the practitioners' own experiences identified that where children's names are placed on the child protection register, the use of wider family can help keep children safe. The aim of this research therefore was to explore the practice of involving wider family by children and families' social workers where a child's name has been placed on the Child Protection Register. The research data was gathered from a number of sources:

Two focus groups took place in the local neighbourhood in which the researchers worked via their team development meeting.

24 social workers were identified, half of whom had involved wider family and half who had not involved wider family in cases where a child's name had recently come off the Child Protection Register. 7 of these social workers in the first group responded and were interviewed. The second group were contacted via email and asked to respond to a written questionnaire. 5 of these social workers responded.

The definition of wider family used in this research is based on current sociological definitions of family which are based on family practices i.e. the sharing of resources, caring responsibilities and obligations. 'Families 'are' what families 'do'' (Morgan as cited in Siva et al., 1999). There is an absence of literature specifically focusing on the use of wider family where children's names have been placed on the child protection register. The majority of research that explores wider family involvement is specifically around Family Group Decision Making. Multiple studies have evidenced that families value involvement, and that engagement with care plans is increased when Family Group Decision Making have been involved (Morris and Connolly, 2012).

In 2012, there were 2706 children whose names had been placed on the Child Protection Register in Scotland, and the City of Edinburgh Council newly placed 371 children on the Child Protection Register. At the heart of any children and families' practice team sits the responsibility to manage child protection. Inherent in this is the role of engaging children and their families, where the child's name has been placed on the Child Protection Register. However the emphasis of policy and practice is on involving family specifically to avoid children being accommodated rather than at an earlier point in the process.

In the seven cases studied in detail where wider family were involved, at the point of deregistration seven children were living in the care of a parent and two children remained in local authority care. None of the children were living with kinship carers. A wide variety of family members were found to be involved with the highest frequency being maternal grandmother and maternal aunt. In all the interviews conducted and in both focus groups, it was clear that social workers were able to identify the multiple and sometimes conflicting roles that family members took. The most frequent support identified was in relation to wider family having contact with the child and in offering emotional support to the family. Overall all social workers contacted believed that risk could be reduced by the involvement of wider family and this can also benefit the children with reference to all areas of 'My world triangle'(Getting It Right For Every Child, 2006).

The findings from this small scale research project identified that there is a paradox at the heart of involving family members. Some of the wider family members have had or continue to have problems in parenting themselves. It was also found to be complex and time consuming for the social workers. It was necessary to assess family members to ensure that they did not increase the risks or collude with parents. It was also found that significant effort was required when liaising with family members often involving facilitating difficult family relationships.

However, the perception of all participants was that there were positive outcomes despite some of the complex circumstances and risks. It was noted that social workers were more likely to make greater effort to involve wider family when it was likely that a child would need to be accommodated

Research focused on children and families' social work inevitably identifies time as a factor that would improve outcomes, and this is also identified in this study. However, it is recognised also that family group decision making teams are not being used to their full potential or sometimes at the optimum stage in the child protection process. This has been raised in both the literature review and in the research study itself. Furthermore, it is not something specifically identified within policy at either local or national government level. Perhaps this needs further exploration so that social workers are encouraged to use the family group decision making team more effectively as well as being given the managerial support to involve family members.