

MAKING A DIFFERENCE FOR CHILDREN AND FAMILIES



WELCOME TO OUR ANNUAL REPORT



Two new projects begun over the last year will produce important evidence to help practitioners provide better services for children and families. Returning home is the most common route out of care but the needs of these newly formed families are often overlooked. An exciting new collaboration between a team at CRCF and at the University of Manchester are analysing data to produce a national picture of what is more likely to foster successful reunification. The study is led by CRCF's Dr Birgit Larsson and is funded by Action for Children. Dr Laura Cook is being funded by the British Academy and the Leverhulme Trust to examine social workers' professional identity. Like many other CRCF members, Laura responded quickly to changes imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic and has adapted her study to also consider the opportunities and challenges of remote working.

This year we completed two major new studies. Our latest Triennial Analysis of SCRs 2014-2017 'Complexity and Challenge' was published in March 2020 and we managed to hold a webinar on the findings with Research in Practice just days before the lockdown. Our Nuffield Foundation funded study of fathers in recurrent care proceedings has important insights about working with fathers who have lost children in these difficult circumstances. It will be the subject of our annual Centre conference for 2020 – a remote event to be held in the Autumn.

This last year has been characterised by innovation and change and we tried a new format for our Annual Centre Conference. We presented findings from five CRCF studies as a springboard to involve the audience in discussions about best practice. There was a real buzz about the day and it's a way of prompting discussions about research findings that we are likely to repeat. We have had an exciting and varied set of CRCF research seminars over the year led by visiting academics and practitioners and our own CRCF researchers. The summer seminars were of necessity held remotely which, fortuitously, opened up these events to a much wider audience where distance was no longer a barrier to attending. Again this is an experiment we will continue.

This exciting and challenging year is my last as Centre Director and in the coming year Prof Jonathan Dickens will take over. It has been a privilege and a pleasure to direct the Centre and I will sorely miss the role and the research contacts forged across the UK. But I know the Centre will continue to rise to new challenges and will keep making a difference for children and families.

MARIAN BRANDON

*Professor of Social Work
Director of the Centre for Research
on Children and Families*



NEWS

RAPID RESEARCH IN RESPONSE TO THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

The shutdown at the end of March 2020 in response to the COVID-19 pandemic meant restrictions and rapid changes for all. Vulnerable children and families found their support services changed or restricted while children's social care made swift adaptations to their services. During this time, some CRCF researchers carried out rapid studies to see how the changes were affecting family life and services.

Beth Neil, Ruth Copson and Penny Sorensen were funded by the Nuffield Family Justice Observatory to undertake a rapid study on family contact during the pandemic. Among much other media activity, Beth and Ruth wrote a blog about the study for Research in Practice.

Laura Cook and Danny Zschomler were already speaking to social workers across England as part of their British Academy-funded project on the retention of experienced social workers.

This meant that during lockdown, they were able to capture the social work response to the pandemic as it was unfolding.

Kate Blake-Holmes used her contacts at Caring Together to set up a rapid study into the impact of the lockdown on young carers. In April 2020 Kate appeared on BBC's Radio 4's Woman's Hour alongside a young carer to raise awareness of the additional difficulties posed during the crisis, and the support offered to young carers by the organisation. Kate has also been interviewed by BBC TV Look East, and BBC Radios Norfolk and Suffolk.

All three studies have been attracting considerable media interest and lively twitter commentary. Brief reports are available on our CRCF website. Findings from Beth's contact study are also on the Nuffield Family Justice Observatory Website. Find out more in the COVID-19 Research Report section.

NEWS

CONFERENCES AND EVENTS

UK CONFERENCES AND PRESENTATIONS

CRCF members have been busy presenting at conferences and to practitioner audiences. A flavour of our activity comes from what we were up to in November 2019. Beth Neil and Julie Young were in great demand to talk about contact after adoption. Julie delivered a one day workshop on contact for Adoption for Central England (7th November) and she worked with Research in Practice to develop a new training course on sibling contact, delivered for the first time in the London Borough of Sutton on 22 November.

Beth spoke about 'Respecting children's relationships and identities in adoption' at the Thames Valley Regional Adoption Agency at the beginning of November. Her topic was 'Contact after Adoption' at the Buckinghamshire and Milton Keynes Family Justice Board Conference on 15th November. A few days later she was in Manchester delivering a workshop about contact after adoption at the Association of Lawyers Annual Conference. And then in Merseyside on 21st November Beth ran a workshop about the 'Moving to Adoption' project for the regional adoption agency Adoption in Merseyside (AiM).

Marian Brandon spoke about the work of CRCF and how research can make a difference for children and families at the Third East of England Perinatal Mental Health Conference, on the 7th November. There was much enthusiasm from the mostly health based, audience about working with us at CRCF on future research.

More locally, Kate Blake-Holmes spoke at the Young Peoples' Mental Health and Wellbeing Conference, on the 15th November 2019. In July 2019 Kate had also presented at a University of York Mental Health Conference about the findings of her study on support needs for young carers of parents with a mental illness as they move into adulthood.

Georgia Philip presented 'Best Practice in Engaging Fathers' in Norwich on 20th November at Norfolk Safeguarding Children Board's 'best practice' event.

INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCES AND LINKS

Gillian Schofield presented a keynote address, 'Providing a secure base in foster care' at two conferences in Spain: at the University of Barcelona in October 2019 and two days later when the conference was repeated, in Palma, Mallorca.

Marian Brandon and June Thoburn contributed to the annual seminar of the International Association for Outcome-Based Evaluation and Research on children's services, which was held in September 2019 in Oviedo Spain. The group's 'Looking Back – Looking Forward' project, led by June, is being submitted for publication. The project sought the views of mid/end career social workers from 9 countries on the messages they would pass on to newly qualified colleagues.

VISITING INTERNATIONAL SCHOLAR

We were delighted to welcome Dr Irene Salvo Agoglia, from the University of Santiago, Chile, to CRCF in January 2020. Irene, an adoption specialist, joined in the life of the Centre and was pleased to have research discussions with Beth Neil. While she was with us, Irene presented a CRCF seminar on 'Adoption Practice in Chile'.

NEWS

CRCF SEMINAR SERIES

For the autumn and winter series of seminars we welcomed visiting speakers as well as our own CRCF researchers. In October 2019 local health practitioners Dr Sarah Steel, Dr Victoria Stanley and Zoe Lewis talked about the work of the new Designated Looked After Children Team discussing how their work can link with CRCF research themes.

Service user and practitioner perspectives on homelessness in the age of austerity was the topic for Christina Carmichael in January 2020, and the lively seminar proved a good warm up for her successful PhD viva. We are very grateful to Dr Dawn Mannay from Cardiff University who in January 2020 gave a CRCF seminar followed by a workshop for our PhD students on participatory research methods with children.

Chris McCree spoke about her pioneering services in London for parents with mental health problems and their children at a seminar in February 2020 and stayed on to talk about possible research links with CRCF.

Our Summer 2020 Series offered exciting opportunities to hear about and discuss new research findings including the three recent studies undertaken about responses to the pandemic lockdown. These were Beth Neil's team's 'Contact in Covid-19 lockdown'; Kate Blake-Holmes' 'Understanding the impact of Covid-19 on young carers, raising awareness

and developing a research agenda' and Laura Cook's 'Child and family social work in the context of COVID-19: possibilities and pitfalls of virtual practice.

Mark Gregory kicked off the series exploring sense-making in social workers' case talk – using analysis from his ongoing PhD. Mark's was the first on-line seminar and he paved the way for a very successful series. Holding the seminars remotely has made them easily accessible to practitioners as well as CRCF members, with up to 75 people attending – many returning for each seminar.

Other seminars included Gillian Schofield and team's new findings from their study of regulations and guidance in foster care, discussing whether the guidance makes a difference to good practice in planning and supporting long-term foster care. We were also pleased to hear from our Visiting Professor Anthony Douglas who discussed the established Cafcass experience of remote working on social work practice.

NEWS

CRCF 2019 ANNUAL CONFERENCE

USING NEW RESEARCH TO HELP VULNERABLE CHILDREN AND FAMILIES THRIVE

For our annual conference in London on 27th September 2019: 'Using new research to help vulnerable children and families thrive', we wanted to involve practitioners directly to discuss our findings alongside their experiences of best practice. The day involved 5 brief presentations from CRCF researchers across a wide spectrum of topics. Each brief presentation was followed by table based discussion. The day ended with a round-up of ideas about best practice and participants said how much they liked the new format and feeling more involved.

Presentations included:

Providing a Secure Base for LGBTQ young people in foster care - Prof Gillian Schofield

Moving children from foster care to adoption: best practice in achieving child-focused transitions - Prof Beth Neil

Working with vulnerable fathers under scrutiny - Dr Georgia Philip

Working with exploited adolescents: learning from serious case reviews - Dr Penny Sorensen

Working with young people living with a parent with a mental illness - Dr Kate Blake-Holmes

NEWS

INTERNS AND WORK EXPERIENCE

CRCF INTERNS

We welcomed three interns in the summer of 2019. Shannon Seale, final year MA Social Work student, worked with Beth Neil and her team on the Evaluating Adoption Support assessments for ONE Adoption project. Shannon analysed the responses of adoptive parents who had completed a survey about their experiences of having an adoption support assessment. We were able to use her write up of this in our interim report to One Adoption.

Claire Hopkins is a second year BA Social Work student worked with Georgia Philip, John Clifton and Marian Brandon on the Nuffield Foundation funded study 'Up Against It'. Claire analysed rich qualitative data from interviews and contacts with men about their experiences of losing more than one child to care, adoption or special guardianship. She was then able to compile case studies which informed the final study report which was published in the Summer of 2020.

Joanna Robinson (MA Social Work student) worked with Julie Young and Birgit Larsson on the Nuffield Foundation long-term foster care project led by Gillian Schofield. Joanna provided valuable help in analysing important survey data.

WORK EXPERIENCE AT CRCF

Part of Jen Coleman's MSc in Psychology involved research-linked work experience and she spent a number of weeks with us at CRCF. This was in the Spring of 2020 before the lockdown brought a premature end to her placement. Jen was based with our PhD students and got such a taste for research and our research environment that she has applied and has been accepted for a PhD with us in the Autumn of 2020.

It is always our hope that some interns will want to come back to do a PhD with us at CRCF after gaining practice experience - and Louise Hartley is the first to do so.

FROM INTERNSHIP TO PHD STUDENTSHIP - LOUISE HARTLEY



I studied for a Master's Degree in Social Work at UEA, from 2015 to 2017, and always knew that I wanted to get into academia. I was one of the first CRCF Interns in the summer of 2016, working with Prof Beth Neil on a study of practitioners' experience of inter-agency adoption work. I gained experience in the qualitative analysis of focus group data, carried out a literature review and presented findings at a CRCF conference. Beth recognised my capabilities and gradually increased the level of challenge in the tasks she gave me. The learning on the Internship was at a pace which gave me a growing sense of confidence, allowing me to seriously consider applying for a PhD.

I built on my knowledge by undertaking a second Internship with Beth. This was a much larger project, The Yorkshire & Humberside Regional Adoption Project Research, in part based on survey data on the adoptive parents' experience of adoption and adoption support. I also helped out on

a paper for the Journal of Developmental Child Welfare in 2018 and it felt great to be published. The experience of quantitative data processing and analysis, literature reviewing, travelling to liaise with adoptive parents and writing chapters cemented my decision to do a PhD in the future.

After being a social worker for two years, I applied for and was awarded a UEA PhD Studentship. I would not have had the confidence to do this without the Internships and the mentoring that Beth gave me. Being around the school for those summers helped me feel comfortable on the staff team and I have also been involved in teaching and marking since starting in October 2019. As the first Intern to progress right through to PhD, I am grateful for the opportunities the Internship gave me.

OTHER NEWS

RESEARCH FOR PRACTICE PODCAST

Join Natasha and Cassian as they speak to social science researchers about what their work means for professionals in education and social care. CRCF PhD student Cassian Rawcliffe and Natasha Reynolds, a PhD student from the School of Education, have developed this monthly podcast which offers engaging chat about new research. They cover wide ranging research from child safeguarding to adult literacy, and anything in between.

@R4Ppod Soundcloud, Spotify, Also available through Apple Podcasts and iTunes

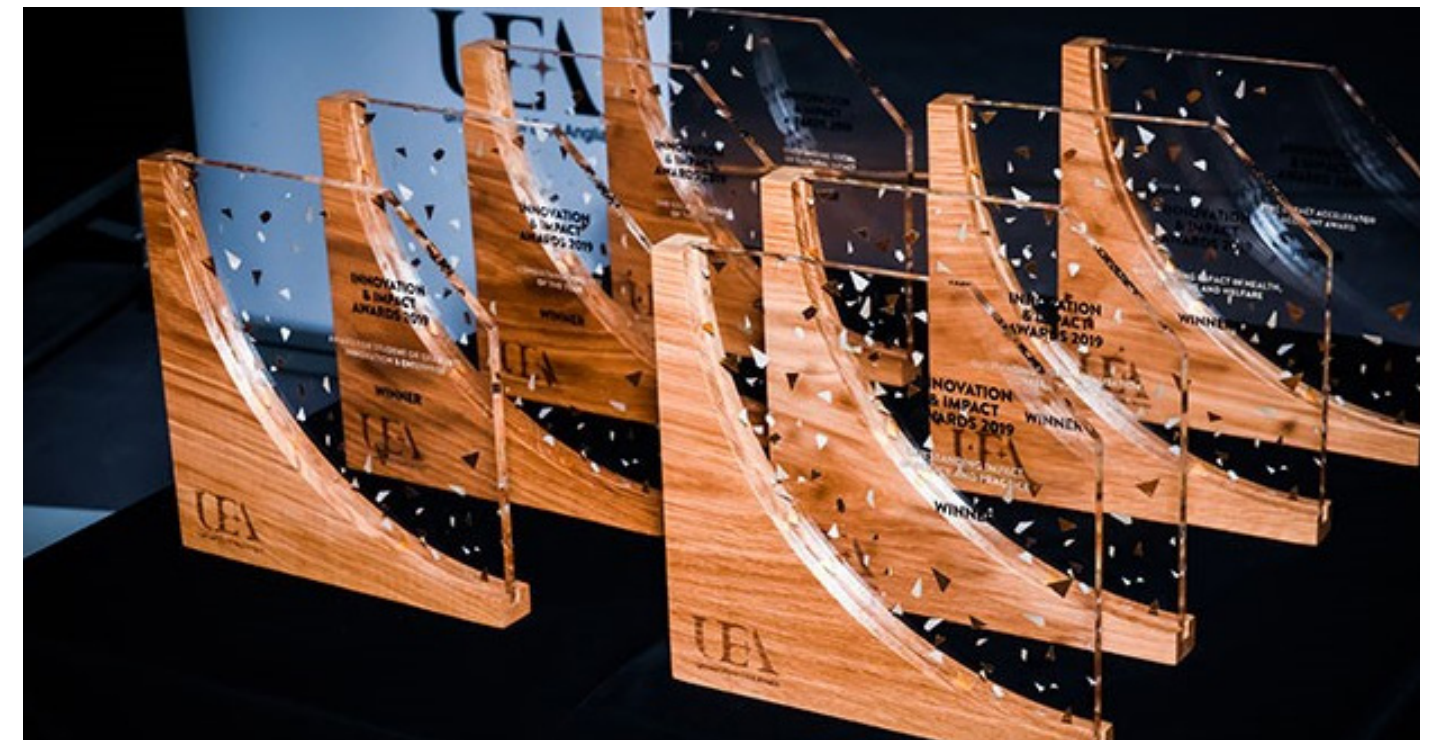
MEDIA ACTIVITY

In July 2019 Beth Neil featured in an article in the Times – ‘Birth parents warned about messages to adopted teens’. The article noted that birth families who have given up children for adoption are increasingly using social media to track them down as teenagers, which can have a de-stabilising effect.

INTERNATIONAL COLLABORATION

Beth Neil is working with a team of researchers and practitioner partners from New South Wales in Australia, on the Australian Research Council funded project “Fostering lifelong connections for children in permanent care”. This action research project is engaging the New South Wales out-of-home care sector to design and trial relationship-based practices that promote positive relationships between children and their birth families. As a member of the expert reference group Beth has been advising on research methods and has been sharing ideas with the team about ‘contact in lockdown’.

rccf-fostering-connections.sydney.edu.au



AWARDS SUCCESS!

Congratulations to **Gillian Schofield, Mary Beek** and **Julie Young** who were finalists in the UEA Innovation Awards in the category of Outstanding Impact in Policy and Practice. This was for their work - The Secure Base Model: Therapeutic Caregiving for Vulnerable Children in Care, Adoption and Schools.

Congratulations to **Marian Brandon, Georgia Philip** and **John Clifton** for winning the Norm Smith Publication in Social Work Research Award 2019 for their article ‘Men as Fathers in Child Protection’ in the journal Australian Social Work. The article was published in October 2019 as part of a special edition on children and the courts.

Congratulations to **Christina Carmichael** who has won this year’s faculty prize for the best published paper by a PGR student ‘No way home: the challenges of exiting homelessness in austere times in Social Policy Review, 32.

IMPACT SUCCESS!

The Secure Base team were also delighted to launch their new training materials for high, primary and special schools in February 2020. The project ‘Providing a Secure Base in Schools’ was funded by the Timpson Trust.

PHD JOB SUCCESS!

Paul McGrath and Christina Carmichael have both been offered research posts where they are able to further their PhD research interests. Paul has a post at Grandparents Plus and Cristina at ‘Crisis’ the national homelessness charity.

Mark Gregory is taking up a post as Lecturer at the University of the West of Scotland. Donna Maree Humphery has just been offered a lectureship at Salford University. We are very proud of our PhD students - congratulations to them all!



IMPACT

MAKING A DIFFERENCE

IMPACT WORKING WITH RESEARCH IN PRACTICE (RiP)

This year we have joined with the dissemination organisation Research in Practice on a number of projects. This includes Beth Neil and Ruth Copson giving a webinar and writing a blog hosted by RiP on their COVID-19 contact study.

IMPACT TRANSITIONAL SAFEGUARDING

Over the Autumn of 2019 Christine Cocker and Adi Cooper, a former Director of Adults' Services, worked with RiP, to deliver workshops on 'Transitional safeguarding: bridging the gap between children's and adults' services'. Workshops were attended by managers from children's and adults' services all over England. Christine and Adi contributed to the RiP blog which explores how to work effectively with adolescents when undertaking safeguarding work, recognising that adolescence throws up different issues that don't disappear at age 18. [ow.ly/Njum30pJ6FW](https://www.researchinpractice.org.uk/blog/2019/12/18/transitional-safeguarding-bridging-the-gap-between-childrens-and-adults-services/) "The challenge remains for Children's Services to learn from adult social care" Dr Christine Cocker and Dr Adi Cooper.

OUR LATEST RESEARCH BRIEFINGS SHOWCASE STUDIES ON LIFE DURING LOCKDOWN





IMPACT COMPLEXITY AND CHALLENGE STUDY

RiP was part of the wider team working on Complexity and Challenge: a triennial analysis of SCRs 2014-2017. Publication of the report in March 2020 was timed to coincide with the re-launch of the dedicated SCR website set up by RiP. A webinar to launch the study, hosted by RiP and available on their SCR website, was delivered by Marian Brandon and Peter Sidebotham (from Warwick University) in March 2020.

Several of the planned summer impact activities for the SCR study have been postponed, including a keynote address by Marian Brandon at the annual NSPCC flagship conference 'How Safe are our Children?' This and other events have been re-scheduled for Spring 2021. Details will be on the CRCF website.

IMPACT PROFESSIONAL PRACTICE IN ADOPTION AND CHILD PLACEMENT

There has been a lot going on in the 'Moving to Adoption' project over the last year. Janet Barker, an adoption manager in Norfolk, joined the team and has been delivering workshops to regional adoption agencies. Beth Neil has presented the practice framework to the Regional Adoption Agencies leaders groups, and to the children's policy team at the Department for Education. Anne Murphy, in her role as a research intern, interviewed adoption managers about how they were managing transitions during lockdown, leading to the team writing new guidance that takes account of social distancing requirements. 'Moving to Adoption' was also one of the studies presented by Beth at our annual CRCF conference. The team are hoping to launch their website soon to make the practice materials more widely available. Do check out the Moving to Adoption research briefing too. <https://ueaeprints.uea.ac.uk/id/eprint/69318>

IMPACT TRANSFORMING CHILDREN'S LIVES USING THE SECURE BASE MODEL

Children in state care are among the most vulnerable in our society and in societies around the world. Previous experiences of physical and psychological trauma, loss and separation mean that children require therapeutic care if they are to recover from developmental harm, achieve happy, stable adult lives and fulfil their potential. To guide and support caregivers and professionals in meeting these children's needs the free to access Secure Base model of therapeutic caregiving was developed by Prof Gillian Schofield and Dr Mary Beek in the School of Social Work at UEA from their fostering research. The Secure Base model has been widely implemented not only across the UK but also internationally, where since 2014 it has played an important role in the development of foster care as an alternative to institutional care in projects in Thailand, China and Ukraine. It has been instrumental in transforming children's life chances in very diverse cultures and contexts

An important new development this year has been the completion of the Providing

a Secure Base in Schools project (2018-20), funded by the Alex Timpson Trust as part of a national initiative to promote attachment awareness in schools. Although a key aim of the national project has been to improve support in school for looked after and adopted children, there are benefits for all children. Mary Beek and Gillian Schofield developed, piloted and made available on our website (www.uea.ac.uk/providingasecurebase/schools) Secure Base training materials for staff in primary and high schools, as well as special schools. The aim of these materials has been to enable staff to use the Secure Base model to create school environments which support children's learning and personal development, through increasing staff awareness of the emotional needs of children and of the importance of available relationships that reduce anxiety and provide children with a secure base.

We were pleased to accept a commission from the Norfolk Virtual School Head for Julie Young to provide Secure Base training to selected Norfolk schools 2019-20.



IMPACT FATHERS IN ADVERSITY



“There has been a big focus on mothers, it’s great dads are now being looked at too”

IMPACT FROM THE FATHERS TEAM

From the ‘fathers team’ at CRCF, Georgia Philip in particular, has been working hard to build the reputation and impact from the two Nuffield funded studies on fathers in child protection. These are the 2017 study, Counting Fathers In and the study completed in the summer of 2020, Up Against It: Fathers in Recurrent Care Proceedings.

From the widely read 2019 practitioner focused report: ‘Building a Picture of Fathers in Family Justice in England’, (on Research Gate) one tweet singled out gender differences in practice “Professionals tended to view women’s difficulties as ‘vulnerabilities’, whereas similar characteristics for men were considered ‘risk factors’ - this can negatively albeit tacitly, influence levels of empathy and expectations for change.”

Our impact is stretching as far as Australia where Marian Brandon, Georgia Philip and John Clifton won an award for their 2019 article ‘Men as Fathers in Child Protection’ in the journal Australian Social Work where the award was given for practitioner influence.

Here in the UK, practitioners are using our research on fathers too – for example in the Research in Practice Frontline Briefing Document ‘Working effectively with men in families’ which features the ‘Counting Fathers In’ study (<https://bit.ly/2XdROki>) as a key resource. Free practitioner resources are also available from the CASCADE website as a result of Georgia’s workshop for the Welsh research Centre in 2019.

In 2019, for the second successive year, Georgia provided three days of training for Norfolk and Suffolk probation staff on working with fathers who are offenders. The Probation Service are keen to partner in future research on this topic.

She also delivered practitioner training on working with fathers to social workers and family support workers in October 2019 in North Lincolnshire.

IMPACT HOW’S YOUR FATHER?

A new and exciting venture stemming from the fathers studies is a community theatre project ‘How’s your father?’ that Georgia is developing with local theatre groups. Work on this can start in earnest when the COVID-19 restrictions are lifted.



RESEARCH PROJECTS



20 COVID-19

Contact during lockdown: understanding how children's connections to birth families are being maintained in the COVID-19 pandemic.

22 Understanding the needs of young carers in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic

24 Child and family social work in the context of COVID-19: current practice issues and innovations

27 CHILD PROTECTION AND FAMILY SUPPORT

Professional identity in child and family social work: what can we learn from the career biographies of experienced workers?

28 'Up Against It': Fathers experiences of recurrent care proceedings

30 Complexity and Challenge: a triennial review of serious case reviews 2014-2017

33 Criminal exploitation in Norfolk

34 CHILD PLACEMENT

Moving to adoption: the development, piloting and dissemination of a practice programme

36 Children in care and reunification with birth parents

37 Planning and supporting permanence in long-term foster care

38 From being adopted to becoming a parent: when adopted people become parents and adopters become grandparents.

39 Evaluation of dyadic developmental psychotherapy/practice programme (DDP): an adoption support intervention

40 Evaluation of the One Adoption Centre of Excellence adoption support assessment process

This year three new projects began and two major studies have been completed and are spreading messages for policy and practice.



CONTACT DURING LOCKDOWN: UNDERSTANDING HOW CHILDREN’S CONNECTIONS TO BIRTH FAMILIES ARE BEING MAINTAINED IN THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC.

MAR 2020 – APR 2020

RESEARCH TEAM: Elsbeth Neil, Ruth Copson, Penny Sorenson

FUNDER: The Nuffield Family Justice Observatory (NFJO)

NEW RESEARCH



Contact with their birth family can meet a range of children’s needs including maintaining valued relationships, managing separation, aiding reunification and understanding identity. ‘Lockdown’ severely restricted in-person contact and travel outside the home. This created barriers to children separated from their birth families spending time face-to-face with their birth families. Government guidance set out the expectation that family contact plans for children in care should continue, but that contact would mostly need to take place virtually, follow the spirit of any contact orders, with social workers making individualised decisions. The NFJO commissioned the research to rapidly find out how contact was being managed and experienced.

AIMS

- To understand what contact was happening during ‘lockdown’, and to consider what help and guidance would be useful to professionals and families in managing children’s family contact (including digital contact) whilst restrictions on in-person contact were in place.
- To learn about what works and does not work in digital contact to find out whether digital forms of contact may benefit children outside of the lockdown period.

METHODS

- an online survey, completed by 196 people (56 professionals, 63 foster carers, 37 kinship carers/ special guardians, 11 adoptive parents, 14 other carers, 15 birth relatives). This asked open questions about what contact was happening, how this was working, and people’s thoughts about the future of digital contact.
- semi-structured telephone or Skype interviews with 17 professionals (from a range of settings/roles), four birth parents, two foster carers and one adoptive parent.

KEY FINDINGS

Facilitating birth family contact for children in care, children in kinship care, and adopted children;

- Almost all face-to-face contact with birth relatives was suspended for all groups of children. For children in residential, kinship or foster care there was widespread use of video calling.
- Letterbox contact remained the plan for most adopted children. In some cases additional letters had been sent — but in others, letters continued as previously planned or were delayed because of logistical problems.

Positives of using video calls:

- For some parents and children, better than not being able to see each other at all.
- Preferred by some children, especially teenagers for whom digital contact could feel more relevant/user friendly.
- For some children who found meetings stressful, can feel easier – safer and less intense or awkward.
- Can create opportunities for better integration between a child’s two worlds, through greater involvement of carers in contact.
- Can be used flexibly e.g. several short video calls rather than one longer fortnightly meeting, more choice of when the contact takes place.
- Less time consuming - no time spent travelling to contact.

Challenges of using video calls:

- For the very young – limited benefits, less effective or confusing - ‘The baby doesn’t really understand why he can hear Mummy but can’t work out where she is’.
- Fears about impact on parenting assessments e.g. parents worried about the lack of opportunity to develop a relationship with their baby.

- Parents and children missing physical contact - ‘It left him feeling the loss of her hugs.’
- Professionals wanted advice about choice of digital platforms, and how to use these safely, protecting the confidentiality of carers and adoptive parents where necessary.
- Some additional stresses for carers, especially helping children engage in video calls, supporting parent’s expectations and managing boundaries.
- Upsetting for some children, for example where video calls made them feel unsafe in their foster home.
- Parents, carers and children may not have equal access to digital devices or the internet; some may not know how to use digital methods.

Ideas about the value of using technology to facilitate contact beyond the immediate crisis

- There was much positivity about continuing digital methods for contact (including as an alternative to ‘letterbox’ contact after adoption) beyond the immediate crisis. Many people wanted to see this as one of a number of options that could be used alongside existing options, as opposed to replacing them.
- Key concerns about future digital contact were that: usage should be decided on a case-by-case basis, with individuals and circumstances taken into account; risks should be effectively managed; digital contact should not replace face-to-face contact where the latter is working well.

Implications for practice

Virtual contact between babies and young children and their parents needs particular consideration. Video calls including very young children should aim to be engaging e.g. including singing, story reading or simple games. Other forms of contact between carers and parents may be needed alongside video calls, (such as sharing photos, video or audio recording, phone calls or letters). The lack

of direct contact between babies and parents, not through the fault of the parents, must be taken into account in decision-making about plans for the child.

Children’s family contact in lockdown should draw on the principles of best practice from the wider contact research:

- keep children’s individual needs, wishes and feelings at the heart of decision-making.
- build trust and good relationships between the child’s birth family and their carers/adopters.
- take the wishes, strengths and support needs of parents and carers/adoptive parents into account.
- assess and manage risks proportionally.
- aim for contact to be a child-friendly, rewarding experience.

The usefulness of digitally-mediated contact should continue to be developed (including in adoption)

IMPACT

A full report and summary have been published on the FJO website:

www.nuffieldfjo.org.uk/resource/lockdown-keeping-in-touch

The research has been shared with various audiences via blogs and webinars e.g.

www.researchinpractice.org.uk/children/news-views/2020/april/virtual-contact-between-children-and-their-birth-families-during-lockdown-unexpected-opportunities

www.grandparentsplus.org.uk/news/grandparent-carers-their-experience-in-supporting-childrens-family-contact-during-lockdown



UNDERSTANDING THE NEEDS OF YOUNG CARERS IN THE CONTEXT OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

APR 2020 – JUN 2020
RESEARCH TEAM: Dr Kate Blake-Holmes in conjunction with Caring Together



NEW RESEARCH

CONTEXT

Young carers are often marginalised, their voices unheard, and their needs unrecognised. It is therefore vital to raise awareness of these concerns in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. These young people provide essential care for their families, often 24 hours a day and over the course of their whole childhood. This can have a detrimental impact on their own social, economic and educational wellbeing as well as their physical and mental health, which may carry forward into adulthood.

The COVID – 19 crisis has far reaching implications for young carers. The indirect impact of attempts to counter the spread of the virus are likely to have a major impact on their psychological wellbeing. Alongside this, support systems are struggling under increased pressure, potentially drawing the focus away from the needs of these marginalised young carers.

AIMS OF THE STUDY

- The study aims to benefit young carers during the COVID-19 pandemic in the following ways:
- Increase the recognition of young people providing care and of the impact of service changes on young carers.
 - Capture the current views of young carers to inform urgent and effective support needs.

METHODS

To gain a rapid and holistic understanding of the issues facing young carers in the COVID-19 crisis, views were sought from a range of perspectives. 20 participants were recruited through young carer organisations and Twitter. Semi structured phone or video conference interviews

were held with 8 young carers, 5 young adult carers, 3 parents of young carers and 4 youth workers. Detailed notes were taken throughout the interviews. Data were analysed from each sub group and combined to inform 4 key emerging themes.

KEY FINDINGS

1. Complexity of care

No two young carers are alike, nor is the complexity or context within which they provide that care. Several young people cared for their parents and their siblings who had a wide range of often competing physical and mental health needs. Care tasks were equally varied - from cooking, cleaning, organising bills, shopping and managing medication, to less easily quantifiable tasks such as emotional support - ‘keeping him happy and calm’, ‘looking out for crisis points’ and ‘making sure mum doesn’t hurt herself’. Young carers from a single parent household appeared to carry a greater level of responsibility. One parent described her son ‘becoming my everything’.

Youth workers said that caring responsibilities for older carers had increased exponentially during the pandemic. Often participants explained that their younger siblings did not understand about the virus or the reason for the lockdown which led to frustration and conflict. Olivia (17) described how the fear and insecurity inherent within the crisis has made her mother increasingly anxious ‘it affects her sleep and then of course mine because she keeps waking me up so she is not alone’.

2. External support

What was often an already uneasy relationship with health and social care services, with poor communication and a lack of awareness of the needs of young carers, has been compounded by the restrictions of social distancing. Hannah (20), returned from university to find her mother’s weekly contact with the community mental

health team withdrawn, putting her back into a full- time care role.

Assessments, services and informal support had been cancelled or withdrawn. Essential services such as shopping delivery, child care and cleaning had fallen, at very short notice, to the young carers.

3. Education

The young people sorely missed the routine, respite and release provided by school. ‘School has always been a place away that I can feel safe’ (Olivia, 17). Teachers could make them feel that ‘someone noticed and someone cared’ (Grace, 15). School support was extremely variable, ranging from weekly phone contact, to taking 10 days to reply to an email. Some young carers were struggling with home learning, feeling unable to focus on themselves and their studies. ‘I am struggling to focus on my college work or anything, even the smallest task makes me really tired, I have no motivation at all’ Jessica (19).

4. Mental health/ managing the stress

The restrictions of lockdown and the anxiety related to COVID -19 risks increased both the young carers’ stress and their caring load. Several could not leave the house because of the physical vulnerability of the person they care for. One youth worker said the young carers’ concern about the health of the person they are caring for can ‘become all consuming’ without any distraction or support in maintaining a healthy perspective.

Despite these very difficult circumstances, many young carers felt unable to complain since ‘moaning’ about the pressures of caring would be ‘selfish’ and insensitive to the person they were caring for. Young carers are often stoical, not wanting to be an added burden - ‘I look after myself, I have always tried to be as independent as possible so no one has to look after me, my parents are busy enough with my sister’ (Grace,15).

Messages from young carers

Young carers were aware of the limited resources available and gave wider messages about what would help them.

- All felt that awareness should be raised about what it means to be a young carer. This is important for health, social care and particularly school staff, the general public, and also, their own peer group.
- They did not want assumptions to be made about their families, or indeed themselves, for example Katie (18) felt that people assumed she could not be a young carer because she was not able bodied.
- All greatly appreciated support from their young carers’ organisation, but were acutely aware of those young carers receiving no support at all.
- All young carers are different and should be able to define the service they receive, choosing when and how to engage.
- Many had enjoyed the online support provided to them during the lockdown.

IMPACT

This project has attracted interest from BBC news, ITV news, Channel 4, LBC, Heart radio and Radio 4 Woman’s Hour. It is hoped that the study will continue to raise awareness and form the basis of practice guidance.

“I can’t get a break, I can’t even get 5 minutes. If I shut my door she is there and then verbally I just have to take it. There is nowhere for me to put it I just have to take it. She becomes anxious, then annoyed, then angry and neither of us can walk away now so I just have to take it.”

CHILD AND FAMILY SOCIAL WORK IN THE CONTEXT OF COVID-19: CURRENT PRACTICE ISSUES AND INNOVATIONS

19 MARCH 2020 – 13 JUNE 2020
RESEARCH TEAM: Dr Laura L. Cook and Dr Danny Zschoemler
FUNDER:



NEW RESEARCH

The lockdown in response to the COVID-19 pandemic marked the beginning of rapid change for Children’s Services. Following the introduction of social distancing measures, social workers needed to move quickly to reconfigure the support they provided.

AIMS

This rapid study aimed to investigate how social workers were responding to the challenges of social distancing. It identifies the possibilities, risks and future implications of ‘virtual’ social work practice.

METHODS

Qualitative telephone interviews were undertaken with 31 child and family social workers across 9 local authorities (LAs) in England, as part of an ongoing research project. Findings are based on data collected during the period immediately before and after lockdown, capturing social workers’ perspectives on their work as the pandemic unfolded.

FINDINGS

Key Messages

- Children and families must be consulted about the recent changes to social work practice.
- Virtual working affords unexpected benefits for social work with children and families, particularly for engaging with young people.
- Virtual engagement has limitations, particularly for child protection and assessment work.
- Virtual home visits create additional risks for professional judgement – particularly around identifying hidden risks.
- Professionals must proactively address barriers to digital inclusion to ensure families have a voice within virtual meetings and reviews.
- Remote working has significant impacts on child and family social workers – these must be addressed to ensure worker wellbeing and retention.

Four key areas of change each presented unexpected possibilities as well as challenges and risks.

1. The immediate impact of lockdown on social work practice

Local authorities needed to move quickly to reconfigure the support provided to children and families. Systems were rapidly being developed to audit contacts with high priority ‘high risk’ cases which came with risks of inadvertently increasing coercive family involvement and carrying out and recording less meaningful contacts with families. Risk assessments made in the weeks following lockdown must be regularly re-visited and reviewed. LAs may need additional capacity for intake and assessment services after children return to school and to meet demand over the coming months.

2. Virtual engagement with children and families

Following lockdown, all but the most urgent home visits were replaced by virtual interactions. Virtual engagement with children was challenging, particularly for younger children. However, as lockdown continued, many social workers expressed great surprise at the unexpected possibilities afforded by virtual practice.

The benefits of virtual engagements with families

The ‘little and often’ approach was welcomed by some families. Social workers could be more responsive to families and many described developing closer relationships with families and becoming more familiar with their everyday lives during lockdown. Virtual communication was greatly preferred by some service users, particularly by looked after young people. Families could share their views with social workers more openly using text/instant messaging. Not having to travel left some workers feeling more energised and focused and able to support more service users.

Risks of virtual engagement with families

Not all families had internet at home or could afford the data costs associated with video calls. Virtual engagement was far less effective without a prior social

work relationship. Virtual home visits had significant limitations for initial assessments and high risk cases with welfare concerns where it could be more difficult to assess the home environment and to pick up on important cues and sensory information. Many social workers felt their judgments about child safety were ‘less robust’ and were concerned they would be blamed for these decisions. It was difficult to ensure both confidentiality and safety during virtual visits – social workers had no way of knowing who might be listening to the call – particularly when talking to children at risk of abuse/neglect and parents experiencing domestic abuse. Virtual communication could be inappropriate for sensitive topics – empathy and reassurance could not be conveyed as effectively. Technology failures could be disruptive and upsetting for families, as well as frustrating for social workers.

3. Family participation in meetings and reviews

Despite the relaxations to the requirements for reviews in the DfE Coronavirus (2020) guidance, social workers continued to hold looked after children reviews, fostering and adoption panels and child protection conferences, conducted virtually.

Social workers mostly used Microsoft Teams with a minority using Zoom, WhatsApp and FaceTime. When inviting families to participate in reviews and meetings, professionals need to consider the four barriers to digital inclusion (access, skills, confidence and motivation) and how these might be overcome on a case-by-case basis. LAs need to consider replacing travel grants for families to attend meetings with grants for WiFi/additional data. Social workers should undertake pre-meeting check-ins with families to ensure they are able to participate, offer reassurance about what will happen and address worries or concerns. Professionals chairing meetings need to regularly check-in with families during meetings.

Chairs may need to consider alternatives to Microsoft Teams where this is a barrier to family participation. LAs need to provide clear guidance on secure platforms for sharing information and those which present security risks. Professionals should encourage staged participation during meetings, not pressuring but also keeping open,

opportunities for family participation throughout the video call. There is an urgent need for consult children, young people, parents and carers about their perspectives on virtual meetings

4. Social worker wellbeing and team support

Aside from infrequent urgent home visits, social workers reported working exclusively from home during lockdown and needed to navigate a new way of staying in touch with colleagues. Team managers can scaffold how workers stay in touch including being alert to difficult dynamics and getting in touch with workers who are new or less vocal online.

Helpful strategies for ‘switching off’ from work included muting work discussions on instant messaging services, and putting away the laptop to ‘clock off’ psychologically. Drawing a psychological boundary around work made it easier to work from home.

There is an urgent need to consider how to support NQSWs eg virtual shadowing opportunities, joining colleagues for virtual home visits or ‘buddying’ with more experienced workers. Supervisors should help social workers consider the ‘blind spots’ in assessment during virtual home visiting.

IMPACT

A fuller briefing for practitioners: Cook, L. L. and Zschoemler D. (2020) Child and family social work in the context of COVID-19: practice issues and innovations. Briefing Paper. Norwich: CRCF - is available at: www.uea.ac.uk/crcf



LEVERHULME
TRUST

PROFESSIONAL IDENTITY IN CHILD AND FAMILY SOCIAL WORK: WHAT CAN WE LEARN FROM THE CAREER BIOGRAPHIES OF EXPERIENCED WORKERS?

AUG 2019 – JUL 2021
RESEARCH TEAM: Dr Laura L. Cook and Dr Danny Zschomler
FUNDER: British Academy/Leverhulme Trust



NEW RESEARCH

CONTEXT

Experienced social workers carry out vital work with some of the most vulnerable families in society. However, retaining experienced practitioners within the workforce is an ongoing challenge for local authorities. The average career span of a qualified social worker has been estimated to be as low as 8 years, compared to over 15 years for nurses and doctors. Little is known about the experiences and career trajectories of social workers who have remained in the profession beyond eight years. It has been suggested that a strong sense of professional identity may promote worker resilience, helping social workers to stay in the profession. There is also evidence that workers may adopt a defensive professional identity to help them survive in the profession. However, little is currently known about how child and family social workers develop a sense of professional identity over time, and what enables them to stay in the profession in the long-term.

AIMS

This research project aims to:

- Learn from practitioners about what is needed to support and retain experienced social workers
- Identity factors that influence the development of professional identity across the career span
- Explore the relationship between professional identity and retention
- Identify the specific support needs of social workers as they move through each stage of their career

COVID -19 response

During lockdown, the team collected additional data capturing the social work response to the pandemic as it unfolded (as reported in the COVID -19 section),

METHODS

Since little is known about social workers who remain in the profession beyond 8 years, they will form the basis of the research sample. 40 child and family social workers with over eight years of practice experience will be recruited from local authorities in England. In-depth biographical interviews will be conducted with each social worker via telephone. Social workers will be asked to look back over their career and identify key episodes which shaped their identity and trajectory through the profession, including moments where they may have considered leaving social work. This will capture the key aspects of identity formation, and provide insights into the career-stage specific support needs of social workers.

FINDINGS AND IMPACT

The findings from the overall project will be published in late 2021 and will be presented at the annual CRCF conference in London. Summary findings and recommendations will be distributed to workforce development leads in Local Authorities in England. Journal articles and further conference presentations are also planned.

“Retaining experienced social workers is an ongoing challenge. This research aims to learn from practitioners themselves about the support they need to stay in the profession.”



LEVERHULME
TRUST

‘UP AGAINST IT’: FATHERS’ EXPERIENCES OF RECURRENT CARE PROCEEDINGS

AUG 2017 - JUN 2020

RESEARCH TEAM: Prof Marian Brandon, Dr Georgia Philip, Dr John Clifton (UEA)
Prof Karen Broadhurst, Dr Yang Hu, Dr Stuart Bedston, Dr Lindsay Youansamouth (Lancaster University)
FUNDER: Nuffield Foundation



CONTEXT

In the wake of a “national care crisis” in England, an increasing number of parents are returning to the family court as repeat respondents in care proceedings, losing successive children from their care. Despite considerable progress in understanding the trends and patterns of mothers who repeatedly lose children to care, similar knowledge about fathers is very limited. This study addresses this gap.

AIMS

The study aimed to establish the scale and pattern of fathers’ repeat appearances in s.31 proceedings, together with a clear picture of the rehabilitative challenges that fathers face and present.

METHODS

The mixed methods research involved three key elements:

1. An analysis of 10 years’ aggregated patterns and trends of fathers in care proceedings in England, from administrative records held by Cafcass.
2. A national survey of 127 men involved in care proceedings.
3. An in-depth qualitative longitudinal study of 26 fathers who have experienced recurrent care proceedings.

A learning network of participating local authorities tested study findings, and met to gain practice perspectives on working with men, to share service models and to encourage more confident and responsive practice with fathers.

FINDINGS

The analysis from the three strands of the study has produced important insights which emphasise the significance of relationships, gender and life-course dynamics of fathers and parents who experience repeat care proceedings.

Fathers return to court with the same partner in 79% of cases which suggests a need for whole-family, gender and couple-sensitive services for recurrent parents.

I had no hope, I had no what do you call it err ‘help’, I had no help at all.

Fathers experiencing repeat care proceedings are often up against different and serious problems in their lives and their relationships. This includes their own or their partner’s mental health, abusive or violent relationships involving one or both partners, and substance misuse (often as a way of coping). Problems with poor housing, a lack of money and few sources of support were major factors affecting the basic security of fathers and their families.

The depression comes and goes in my life, and basically, I call it my sidekick really.

Fathers going through repeated loss of children have powerful and painful emotions of grief, anger, guilt and shame that are hard to bear. Fathers felt that professionals did not recognise this and it was difficult to find any help or support. Different ways of coping included working long hours, lashing out, cutting themselves off, drinking or using drugs, taking antidepressants or just trying to keep their minds occupied. When fathers felt judged or ‘shamed’ by social workers or others, they said it was impossible to build any trust.

I’ll snap on the outside in a really short time but on the inside it stays and really hurts.

Fathers mostly had some contact with children they did not live with. A minority had no contact. Contact had mostly changed (got better or worse) over time. Two fathers had children come to live with them as the result of care proceedings.

Reclaiming fatherhood

While the majority of fathers were trying to make positive changes in their lives and relationships with children, a minority of the most marginalised men, who were cut adrift from their children and families, could not see change as possible. Finding ways to feel like fathers again was vital to seeing change as possible. Rebuilding lost or damaged relationships was hard with many setbacks. Some fathers felt that all they could do was ‘wait’ for children to find them in the future. Regaining basic security, like somewhere secure to live, a job, or getting help with a health problem was a key part of ‘reclaiming fatherhood’. Having a positive, safe relationship with a partner also helped. Finding help from family, or from services, was difficult though, with limited support for men as fathers.

I am not going to be known as the dad that didn’t care, never!

How can local authorities and the family court work better with fathers involved in repeat care proceedings?

Local authority services and voluntary organisations need to consider how to support fathers whose children may be removed from their care and the longer term consequences when they are removed repeatedly. Even when contact with children is not possible, there may still be ways for fathers to be a positive part of their children’s lives. This includes helping children understand their identity and history, making apologies for hurt or harm, and supporting relationships between children and their paternal family. Services need to be sensitive and responsive to gender differences and the particular circumstances, challenges or needs of fathers. Services that promote and support men’s mental and emotional health are very important.

I have got to accept the fact that, that little boy ain’t never going to live with me until he is grown, if he decides, so what I have now got to do is make sure that between now and then he understands he has got a dad who loves him and that is there for him.

IMPACT

This study will provide the focus of the 2020 CRCF Annual Conference. Uncertainties about lockdown restrictions mean we are still considering when and how best to hold this conference. (See also Impact section of this annual report)

A practitioner focused report is freely available via ResearchGate (see below) as well as other academic publications (see below). We have also produced a summary of findings for fathers on which this research summary is based.

PUBLICATIONS

Bedston, S., Philip, G., Youansamouth, L., Clifton, J., Broadhurst, K., Brandon, M., & Hu, Y. (2019) *Linked lives: Gender, family relations and recurrent care proceedings in England*, *Child and Youth Services Review*. Volume 105, 104392

Philip, Bedston, Hu, Youansamouth, Clifton, Brandon & Broadhurst (2018), *Building a Picture of Fathers in Family Justice in England*, University of East Anglia and Lancaster University.

https://www.researchgate.net/publication/328957622_Building_a_Picture_of_Fathers_in_Family_Justice_in_England/download

“Dads love just as hard as Mums”



COMPLEXITY AND CHALLENGE: A TRIENNIAL REVIEW OF SERIOUS CASE REVIEWS 2014-2017

APR 2018 - MAR 2020
RESEARCH TEAM: Prof Marian Brandon, Prof Jonathan Dickens, Dr Penny Sorensen, Dr Pippa Belderson (UEA). Prof Peter Sidebotham, Dr Jo Garstang, Prof Hedy Cleaver, Dr Julie Harris, Dr Russell Wate (Warwick University) with Research in Practice
FUNDER: Department for Education



CONTEXT

Complexity and challenge provides an underlying theme in this review of SCRs from 1 April 2014- 31 March 2017. As we looked into the reviews of children affected by serious and fatal child maltreatment, we were struck by the complexity of the lives of these children and families, and the challenges – at times overwhelming – faced by the practitioners seeking to support them in such complexity.

AIMS AND METHODS

The study’s primary aim was to understand the key issues, themes and challenges for practitioners and agencies, and to draw out implications for both policy makers and practitioners. A mixed methods approach was used, encompassing:

- Quantitative analysis of the full sample of 368 SCR cases, using information from DfE notification data for the specified time period;
- Analysis of more detailed data available through in-depth reading and coding of a sub-set of 278 SCRs;
- Qualitative analysis of 63 final reports, sampled from the 278 available SCRs, examining the themes of neglect, vulnerable adolescents, care and court cases, as well as the quality of SCR final reports;
- A national survey, distributed to all English LSCBs, about the implementation and impact of SCR recommendations, with follow up phone interviews with 20 survey respondents;
- Two regional practitioner/leader workshops to test emerging findings and gauge views about the impact of SCRs on child protection practice.

FINDINGS

The increase in SCRs noted between 2011- 2014 has not continued into 2014-17. The numbers of children who die each year as a direct consequence of maltreatment have held relatively steady at an average of 28 cases a year. This is in the context of year on year increases in child protection activity nationally, with a rise in section 47 enquiries, child protection plans and numbers of children in care. The review of ten ‘in care’ cases emphasised the importance of trauma-informed practice and a forward-thinking perspective for children and young people going through the courts.

Complexity of children and families’ lives:

- Complex, cumulative nature of vulnerability, risk and harm.
- Growing levels of neglect, wider, deeper, context of poverty.
- Adolescents and the youngest children continue to be the most vulnerable to harm and fatality.
- New adolescent threats and vulnerabilities and continuing concerns when adolescents ‘go missing’.

Challenges facing professionals:

- Working within a context of deepening austerity and cuts (since 2011).
- Building effective structures and promoting responsive cultures in the context of resource constraints.
- Pressure points at the boundaries into and out of the child protection system. The risks of harm outside of the child protection system and high thresholds emphasise the need to continue to support children and families when a child no longer has a child protection plan.
- Difficulties with professional challenge - when a decision is challenged it is not necessarily heard.
- Practitioners working with adolescents can feel unprepared when working in newer areas of exploitation (eg criminal exploitation, digital harmful sexual behaviour) and with changing digital technologies. Virtual spaces provide hidden opportunities for exploitation.

Pathways to protection – working with children and families

- For effective practice: contextualise the lives of vulnerable children, hear their voice, understand their lived experience. Also understand the experience and perspectives of mothers, fathers and carers.
- Be supported in relationship-based work with children and families. A positive, consistent relationship can result in increased protection for the child and life-changing support for parents.
- BUT beware drift and loss of focus on the outcomes of intervention. Beware over-optimism (eg over continued harmful drug use).

Pathways to protection - Working Together

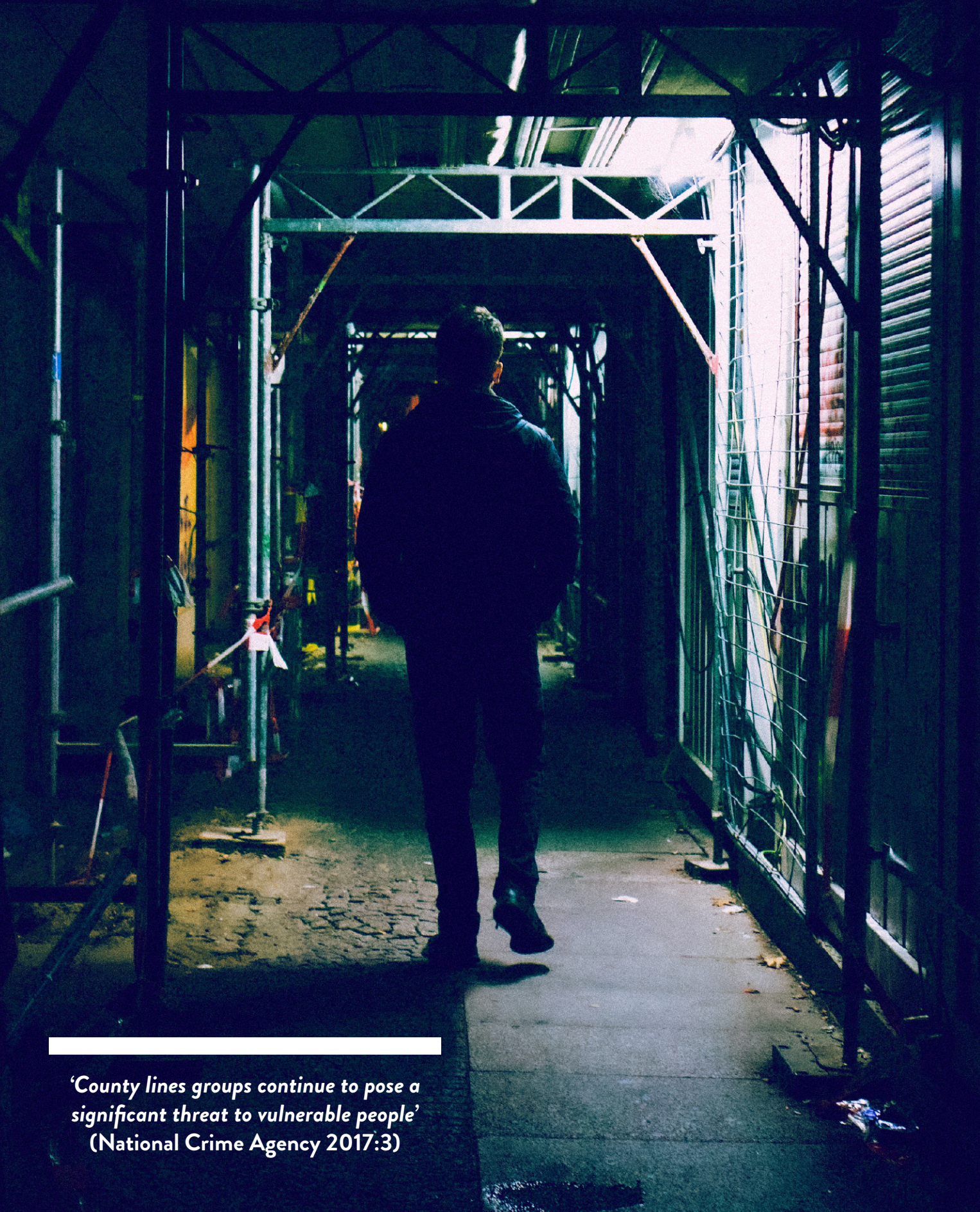
- The high number of agencies involved can result in fragmented and uncoordinated services which can lead to silo working within and between agencies.
- We found some practitioner reluctance to pass on information, and abiding confusion about what can/ can’t be shared – when information sharing is crucial.
- There is a need for deeper scrutiny of the underlying systems that present barriers to models of good practice that can enhance good relationships with families and good communication.

IMPACT

Although this project was intended to be the focus for the Annual CRCF Conference for 2019, delayed publication meant this was not possible. Early dissemination after eventual publication on 4 March 2020 included a webinar organised by Research in Practice on 18 March which was attended by over 100 people just days before the COVID 19 lockdown.

Research in Practice has updated their SCR website <https://seriouscasereviews.rip.org.uk> to include the report and online downloadable summaries of findings for those in key practice roles in different professional sectors. A keynote presentation based on this study was to have been part of the NSPCC’s flagship Annual Conference in June 2020, but this has been postponed to March 2021. Similarly a ten year anniversary conference of the SILP practice review method which will be based on this study’s findings, has been re-scheduled for 2021.

The damaging impact of poverty on children and their families and the growing problems of exploitation are revealed in this new aSCR report.



CRIMINAL EXPLOITATION IN NORFOLK

MARCH 2019-FEBRUARY 2020
RESEARCH TEAM: Dr Jane Dodsworth, Dr Penny Sorensen
FUNDER: Norfolk Constabulary



CONTEXT

The objective of the study was to explore how involvement in county lines, and criminal exploitation, was experienced by children and vulnerable adults in Norfolk. Whilst there is no official definition of county lines, the National Crime Agency (2016:5) note that ‘typically county lines activity involves a gang (usually made up of young males) from a large urban area travelling to smaller locations (such as a county or coastal town) to sell class A drugs, specifically crack cocaine and heroin.’ It is already known that vulnerable young people and adults in Norfolk are facing a significant threat from organised criminals from other areas of the country.

AIM

The study aimed to inform the work of the Police and the Norfolk Safeguarding Children Board about the nature and extent of the problem and to suggest effective interventions to deal with both perpetrators and victims.

METHODS

As part of a qualitative methodology, narrative interviews were carried out with young people and vulnerable adults involved in county lines activity. We also interviewed residents living in ‘hot spots’ for gang and county lines activity. Two focus groups with safeguarding professionals enabled us to explore the concept of contextual safeguarding. We used thematic analysis and developed case studies to support practitioner training.

FINDINGS

While experiences of those affected by county lines activity are diverse, there are also many common features.

Key messages

- Reducing the risk of exploitation requires an ecological view of behaviour and a more holistic way of protecting children.

- Work within the community is expanding but is still focused on specific areas and not yet a community service.
- Services need to be provided that young people want to engage with and which offer viable alternatives to drug dealing/exploitation.
- Since all young people are vulnerable to exploitation we should be prepared to notice its first signs. Real prevention is possible if services and support step up provision at this early point.
- Young and adult victims of criminal exploitation do not necessarily require specialist support. Having just one person who believes in them and stays alongside them for as long as is needed makes a real difference. Kindness and consistency appear to trump ‘new and innovative’.
- Community policing makes communities feel valued and deters county lines activity. This must involve building relationships with all members of a community. Residents wanted to see increased police presence, and this community reassurance could possibly be undertaken by volunteer police support.
- To have continued engagement and cooperation from local communities, Norfolk Constabulary need to communicate with residents to keep them updated with news about their local area. Learning about successful police operations may mitigate the view that the police force only reacts to serious incidents.

IMPACT

By drawing on the expertise of those working with and affected by county lines activity, we have been able to highlight what a more consistent, efficient and effective approach in Norfolk looks like.

PUBLICATIONS

The report was published in February 2020. Journal articles are also planned.

‘County lines groups continue to pose a significant threat to vulnerable people’
(National Crime Agency 2017:3)



MOVING TO ADOPTION: THE DEVELOPMENT, PILOTING AND DISSEMINATION OF A PRACTICE PROGRAMME

2016 - 2020
RESEARCH TEAM: Dr Mary Beek, Prof Elsbeth Neil, Prof Gillian Schofield, Janet Barker and Anne Murphy
FUNDER: Sir Halley Stewart Trust



CONTEXT

In the UK most adopted children are very young (under 5 years) when placed for adoption. They will often have lived in foster care for 18 months or longer before being matched with new parents. Typically, the move from foster to adoptive family takes place in 7–14 days, depending on the child’s age. After the move, children may have little or no contact with their former foster carers. Although these moves can go well, in other cases these moves can be abrupt and distressing for children and for adopters and foster carers. Professionals are uncertain about how to plan and support these transitions in a more child focussed way.

AIMS

This project aimed to develop a practice programme to support positive moves for children from the foster to the adoptive family. Follow on funding was awarded to extend the project until 2020 to enable the learning to be disseminated more widely.

METHODS

Phase 1 (2016-18)

A review of theory and research was carried out. In consultation with stakeholders the project team developed a practice programme, underpinned by the Secure Base model. The model suggests that secure base relationships in foster care can support the child to gradually build trust in the adopters and to establish secure base relationships in the adoptive family.

The practice programme is not prescriptive about how children’s moves should be planned, but instead suggests an individualised approach to each move, with consideration given to the following key principles:

- Opportunities for the foster carers and adopters to build a positive relationship should be promoted at an early stage in the moving process, as this is helpful to the success of the move.
- The child and the adopters should be given opportunities to become familiar with each other through play and observation prior to adopters undertaking any caregiving tasks.
- All arrangements and timescales should focus on the needs of the child.
- The child’s feelings about the move should be held in mind, and responded to sensitively.
- Some continuity of foster family relationships and environment will support the child in managing the loss of the foster family and building trust in the adoptive family.
- There should be flexibility in the planning, in consultation with the child, the families and the social workers, to allow for emerging circumstances and needs.

The programme was piloted in two adoption agencies (about 45 cases) and practice development workshops were held with key staff. Online feedback surveys collected data about each child’s move from the perspectives of social workers, foster carers and adopters. A final stakeholder workshop discussed next steps following the pilot.

Phase 2 (2019-20)

The existing practice programme has been refined into a coherent and comprehensive ‘Moving to Adoption Practice Model’, providing clear practice guidance and training materials addressing issues arising from the pilot and consultation. This will be made widely available via a website, and through workshops, publications, and social media. Agencies wishing to implement the model are being offered support.

FINDINGS

The project demonstrated that the UEA model has the potential to improve the experience of moving to adoption for children and their foster and adoptive families, and also that agencies could implement the model within existing procedures and legislation.

The pilot agencies reported a wide range of practice whilst adhering to the key principles of the practice programme. From these reports we were able to describe three key stages of the moving process (the UEA model): stage 1 – Getting to know each other; stage 2 – making the move; stage 3 – supporting relationships after the move.

In contrast to traditional practice, moves made using the pilot programme tended to extend the overlap between foster and adoptive families. This was primarily through allowing for more familiarisation before the move was made and more contact after the move, with the period of intensive contact usually completed in about two weeks, as before.

“I think that the amount of time he was able to spend in the adopters’ house and in their company whilst I was still present to reassure him definitely made the move much easier for him.” (Foster carer)

IMPACT

The research has been featured in a book chapter ‘Respecting children’s relationships and identities in adoption’ by Elsbeth Neil and Mary Beek, published in the (2020) Handbook of Adoption (Routledge). The team are also working on a good practice guide to be published by CoramBAAF in 2021.

In stage two of the project, practice workshops have been held with a number of regional adoption agencies (RAA) leaders group, and with the Department for Education (DfE). The COVID-19 pandemic, and requirements of social distancing, are impacting children’s moves to adoption. The team are currently working with the RAA leaders and the DfE to inform the development of new guidance on children’s moves to adoption whilst social distancing requirements are in place.



“The team are currently working to inform new guidance on children’s moves to adoption whilst social distancing requirements are in place.”

CHILDREN IN CARE AND REUNIFICATION WITH BIRTH PARENTS

APR 2020 – DEC 2020

RESEARCH TEAM: Dr. Birgit Larsson, Prof Elsbeth Neil, (UEA)
Dr. Marcello Morciano, Dr. Yiu-Shing Lau (University of Manchester)

FUNDER: Action for Children



NEW RESEARCH

CONTEXT

Returning home to live with parents is the most common route out of care, yet in terms of policy, practice and research the needs of children/young people who return home and the needs of their families are often overlooked.

The project is being jointly led by CRCF at the University of East Anglia and the Health Organisation, Policy and Economics (HOPE) research group, University of Manchester.

The research team will analyse Children in Need, Children Looked After and National Pupil Database data from 2009/10-2017/18 in order to produce a national picture of the characteristics and pathways of young people in care who return home.

AIMS

- Identify the numbers, characteristics, and needs of children who have experienced reunification with birth parents
- Identify pathways into and out of care for children who have experienced reunification with birth parents
- Identify the outcomes for children who are reunified with parents (eg. Do they return to care? Do they continue to be recorded in the CiN dataset? Are there any subsequent incidents of abuse recorded in CiN?)
- Identify how the profiles of numbers, characteristics, needs, pathways, and outcomes of children who return home differ between local authorities
- Determine the educational performance of children who have been in care and returned home at key stage 4

METHODS

Analysis of *child-level* data will draw on the Children in Need (CiN), Looked after Children (CLA), and National Pupil Data (NPD) datasets from 2009/10 to 2017/18 in order to identify individual characteristics of children who return home, their identified needs, their pathways to reunification, and their associated available outcomes. Child level data will also be aggregated at local authority level to explore variations between local authorities in relation to a broad range of outcomes, including rates of reunification and rates of successful reunification. CiN/CLA aggregated data will be complemented with a series of routinely-collected administrative data in order to explore associations between the reunification outcomes and a range of factors capturing differences in the demographic and socio-economic pressures local authorities face.

IMPACT

Findings will be disseminated in a variety of formats so that they are accessible to service providers, commissioners and stakeholders. These include a final report which will include suggestions for further research, a CRCF research briefing, peer-reviewed articles, and three policy practice seminars, one in Manchester, one in Norwich, and one at Action for Children. Findings will further be communicated through social media channels and conferences.



PLANNING AND SUPPORTING PERMANENCE IN LONG-TERM FOSTER CARE

NOV 2018- JAN 2021

RESEARCH TEAM: Prof Gillian Schofield,
Dr Birgit Larsson, Prof Elsbeth Neil, Julie Young

FUNDER: Nuffield Foundation



CONTEXT

Although long-term foster care has long been recognised as a permanence option, it was not until 2015 that the Government introduced the first formal Regulations and Guidance. The aims were to define long-term foster care, to ensure effective care planning and to promote successful long-term foster care placements. Local authorities were also required to record and identify children in long-term foster placements in their SSDA903 submissions to the Department for Education. This study builds on a series of CRCF long-term foster care projects led by Prof Schofield and colleagues since 1997.

AIMS

- Investigate the implementation in England of the Government Regulations and Guidance for Long-Term Foster Care (2015).
- Identify which children are in long-term foster care placements and explore their pathways.
- Determine how long-term foster care as a permanence option is being implemented.
- Identify what is working well in care planning procedures and practice in order to provide models of good practice for other local authorities.
- Identify any aspects of the Regulations and Guidance that are causing concern.
- Provide up to date information and practice guidance to support policy makers and a range of stakeholders in developing effective care planning and practice in long-term foster care.

METHODS

- An **analysis of the national data** on children in long-term foster care and their profiles and pathways using Children in Need (CiN) and CLA / SSDA903 data. This has been affected by delays in accessing data, most recently caused by the coronavirus.

- A **survey** of all local authorities and independent fostering agencies. These were returned by 220 service managers providing information on practice and procedures in 110 (75%) local authorities and 18 independent fostering agencies.
- **Telephone research interviews** with 43 managers from a target sample of 30 local authorities which represent different profiles and procedural systems.

PRELIMINARY FINDINGS

1. The majority of local authorities report that the 2015 Regulations and Guidance have had a positive effect in promoting long-term foster care as a legitimate permanence option and supporting robust procedures for matching, with ‘Staying Put’ offering an important option to extend the foster family role into early adulthood.
2. Good care plan data management is a key part of permanence tracking, avoiding drift and recording confirmed long-term foster care placements.
3. Reunification and kinship placements under Special Guardianship are the preferred options for permanence, with adoption seen as most appropriate for young children and long-term foster care for older children when these are not possible.
4. Permanent placement decisions for sibling groups in this context remain challenging, with some long-term foster care plans for young children in sibling groups.

IMPACT

A range of impact strategies, including a launch conference, will make findings available to policy makers and practitioners

PUBLICATIONS



Articles, research reports and summaries for practice will begin to be made available from January 2021



FROM BEING ADOPTED TO BECOMING A PARENT:
WHEN ADOPTED PEOPLE BECOME PARENTS AND
ADOPTERS BECOME GRANDPARENTS.

2018 - 2021

RESEARCH TEAM: Prof Beth Neil, Dr Julia Rimmer and Dr Irina Sirbu
FUNDER: Economic and Social Research Council



CONTEXT

In recent decades UK policy has encouraged the adoption of children from care, and tens of thousands are now of an age where they could become a parent. It is important to study the lifelong effects of adoption, including what happens when adopted people become parents to the next generation.

A child’s birth is a key event in any family, bringing joys and challenges for both parents and grandparents. The majority of children adopted in the last 30 years will have experienced early adversities such as loss, abuse and neglect which may affect their subsequent wellbeing and development over time, including identity development. Studies of other potentially vulnerable parents (e.g. care leavers) show they are at risk of early parenthood, parenting difficulties, even their own children going into care. But for some, having a child is a positive choice and a healing experience. This study explores the positives and the challenges of becoming a parent from the perspectives of people adopted in the last 30 years. This study will provide a new understanding of the lived experiences and needs of adopted people who are now parents, and of adoptive parents who are now grandparents, drawing on narrative identity and risk and resilience frameworks.

AIMS

The overarching aims of the project are to provide a new understanding of the lived experiences and needs of adopted people who are now parents, and of adoptive parents who are now grandparents. These insights will be used to inform the support of adopted children and young people, adopted adults, the children of adopted adults, and adoptive parents who are grandparents. This will then inform future developments in adoption theory, policy and practice.

METHODS AND FINDINGS

We will collect and analyse 80 in-depth narrative interviews (using McAdam’s Life Story Interview Method) with adoptee parents and adoptive parents (now grandparents). Narrative and thematic analysis will be used to answer the research questions. The involvement of stakeholders (professionals, adoptees and adoptive parents) will inform the recruitment of participants, the data collection and analysis will help generate a sound understanding of practice and policy implications informing the future of adoption. The research is now underway. We have already met with the academic advisory group and three stakeholder groups to plan to the study. Data collection will continue throughout 2019.

IMPACT

Wider social benefits will come through building understanding of a particularly complex and challenging family form with a mixture of biological, legal and relational ties. The study is highly relevant for academics interested in narrative identity, adoption, vulnerable parents, grand-parenting, and resilience. Findings from the research will be disseminated and published in a range of formats addressing the key audiences (blogs, presentations, academic articles and policy/practitioner articles).




<https://www.ueaadoptedparents.co.uk>



EVALUATION OF DYADIC DEVELOPMENTAL
PSYCHOTHERAPY/PRACTICE PROGRAMME
(DDP): AN ADOPTION SUPPORT INTERVENTION

APR 2017 – NOV 2019

RESEARCH TEAM: Dr Christine Cocker, Prof Beth Neil;
Dr Penny Sorensen
FUNDER: Adoptionplus via DfE National Prospectus Grant



CONTEXT

Adoptionplus is an adoption agency based in Buckinghamshire which offers an Adoption Placement Service, a Developmental Trauma and Attachment Therapy Service and a Training and Conference Service. DDP is an attachment focussed family therapy approach designed to meet the needs of children who have experienced trauma and loss, and developed by Dan Hughes (Hughes 2011). It is one of a number of therapy services offered by Adoptionplus.

In April 2017, Adoptionplus commissioned UEA to undertake an independent evaluation of its DDP social work service. However, changes to the Adoption Support Fund in 2017, reduced numbers of referrals to the service, and this significantly affected the numbers of families able to take part in the research. This in turn resulted in the decision to cease the evaluation in February 2019.

AIMS

The aim was to explore the impact on families of the DDP practice based therapeutic approach provided by social workers, in order to assess its potential to help families and to inform any future evaluation planning.

METHODS AND FINDINGS

CRCF researchers collected pre-intervention data from a small number of parents (n=4), which indicated that their children had a high level of need at the point they first accessed the service. In-depth interviews were carried out with two parents who had partially completed the programme. In-depth interviews were also completed with three members of staff (social workers), who reported

positive experiences of the intervention, both in terms of their own staff development and the impact on families.

However, the small sample sizes used in this study affected the robustness of the evaluation and the study was unable to reach any conclusion about whether the intervention made a significant difference to families. The small amount of data show that the children in families referred to the service had high levels of need. The parents interviewed gave promising feedback about the service whilst partway through receiving it.

The service has been affected by changes to the Adoption Support Fund, in particular the cap on money that could be given to an adopted child and their family in any given year. This impacted families being able to receive the services that they said they were finding helpful. The experience of Adoptionplus has also been that it is rare for local authorities to match fund post-adoption support, and this has also affected the funding of their services.

IMPACT

A final report was completed in November 2019.

References:

Hughes, D. (2011) Attachment Focused Family Therapy: The Workbook. New York, WW Norton.

“Oh I would tell them it’s amazing. I have already recommended it to lots of people! Yeah, I would tell them to do it, that it has been incredible for us.”
Parent’s view of the post-adoption service at Adoptionplus



EVALUATION OF THE ONE ADOPTION
CENTRE OF EXCELLENCE ADOPTION
SUPPORT ASSESSMENT PROCESS

NOV 2018 - NOV 2020
RESEARCH TEAM: Prof Beth Neil, Julie Young
FUNDER: One Adoption West Yorkshire



CONTEXT

Many adopted children need ongoing help, and adoption agencies have responsibilities for assessing what support children and their adoptive families may need both before children are adopted, and after the adoption order when families request help. The regional adoption agency One Adoption West Yorkshire (OAWY) were awarded government funding in 2017 to establish a ‘Centre for Excellence’ programme of co-ordinated assessment, treatment and therapeutic support for adopted children and children in care. One Adoption West Yorkshire initiated the changes in their area with their new standardised assessment framework for adoption support becoming active in March 2019.

The UEA research team were brought in to help evaluate the impact of the changes. The process began with the team’s previous research (2016-18) which surveyed adoptive parents in the region to provide insight into the needs of adopted children, outcomes of adoption for children and families and families’ experiences of using support services.

AIMS

- To provide a baseline with regard to adoptive parents’ experiences of adoption and support service provision
- To provide insight into adoptive parents’ experiences of the new OAWY standardised framework for adoption support assessments (pre and post adoption)
- To provide insight into practitioner experiences of the new OAWY standardised framework for adoption support assessments (pre and post adoption)

METHODS

1) Further analysis of data from the research team’s previous 2016-7 adoptive parent survey will be undertaken, looking at how children’s needs match up to the diagnoses and services they received and the families’ experiences of these services. Anonymised case studies from the data will illustrate children’s needs, outcomes, and service provisions and make suggestions for practice.

2) With the help of practitioners and administrative staff from OAWY and social media/networks, a short anonymous online survey will be distributed to families who:

- have approached/are approaching OAWY for new support or help since 1st April 2017
- had a child placed with them for adoption by OAWY after 1st April 2017

The surveys will be informed by the views of the adopter forum in the region and will focus on a ‘target child’ in the family. They will be kept active until around mid 2020 to cover an approximately two year period prior to and one year subsequent to the new standardised assessments being made active. Respondents will be given the opportunity to supply contact information if they are interested in taking part in a telephone interview. A small number of interviews will explore themes raised in the surveys in more detail.

3) Three developmental workshops will be conducted with staff involved in the new assessment processes. OAWY will be provided with ongoing feedback from these activities.

IMPACT

A report, research briefing and presentation of the findings will be provided at the end of the project to OAWY to inform policy and practice.



PHD RESEARCH

MANAGING SUPERVISED CONTACT IN EARLY PERMANENCE PLACEMENTS



PHD STUDENT: Ruth Copson
SUPERVISORS: Prof Elsbeth Neil, Dr Laura Cook
FUNDER: UEA Funded PhD Studentship

The aim of this study is to explore two complex aspects of social work practice that are relatively invisible in research – the first is Early Permanence (aka Fostering for Adoption), where a baby is temporarily fostered by prospective adopters who may go on to adopt them, and the second, supervised contact, which is the time that the baby spends with their birth parent/s during care proceedings, usually in a contact centre supervised by a professional. Contact takes place for the majority of children in care, but there is little evidence on what happens during contact and the beneficial or adverse effects it may have. This research aims to offer a unique insight into how this contact is managed, transacted, understood and experienced by all those involved in Early Permanence, particularly the infant, with the aim of developing a theoretical understanding of the dynamics of supervised contact.

A qualitative method is proposed. Five cases will be followed over the course of care proceedings (approx. 26 weeks), capturing change over time. Three contact sessions per case will be observed using the Tavistock Method of Infant Observation and semi-structured interviews will be undertaken at the beginning and end of proceedings with the primary carer and birth parent/s. Social workers and contact supervisors will be interviewed at the end of proceedings. Observational field notes will be interpreted through a psychoanalytical lens and all data will be analysed using thematic analysis, within then across cases.

Research findings will feed into social work theory and practice, informing the development of tools for observing and supervising contact, as well as assessing how infants respond to contact. Suggestions will be provided on the management of contact, and guidance will also be offered on the preparation and support of prospective adopters and birth parents.

PATHWAYS OF WOMEN RESOLVING ALCOHOL PROBLEMS



PHD STUDENT: Louise Hartley
SUPERVISORS: Dr Birgit Larsson, Prof Jonathan Dickens
FUNDER: UEA Funded PhD Studentship

Alcohol misuse is complex and empirical research spans a wide range of disciplines, from health and social care to psychology and social policy. Qualitative studies tend to focus on participants who are either still misusing alcohol or those who are now abstaining. There is little research analysing narratives of women resolving alcohol problems.

Problematic alcohol use can be seen as a response to difficult life experiences (self-medication hypothesis), a choice (control model), developed in the individual's social context (social learning model) and/or as an incurable disease (disease model). Adopting a particular model has implications for self-perception and feelings of agency and victimhood. Terms such as 'disease', 'sober' and 'in recovery' can also impact on identity and transitions from 'addict' to abstainer. Women face further stigmatisation in a culture where their alcohol misuse can be seen as at odds with traditional codes of femininity.

The aim of the study is to use Wengraf's Biographic Narrative Interpretive Method (BNIM) with 12 female participants to record and transcribe biographical accounts of their lives. After an initial opening question and uninterrupted telling, the interviewer asks follow up questions in order shed light on the pathways and identities of these women. The BNIM interviewing technique aims to guide participants towards narrating lives from past perspectives as opposed to solely retrospective telling. BNIM analysis is influenced by psycho-social theories.

It is hoped that this research will shed light on pathways into and out of problematic alcohol use in women and contribute to discussions around effective interventions.

EXPLORING NARRATIVES OF MOTHERS OF CHILDREN WHO HAVE BEEN SEXUALLY ABUSED



PHD STUDENT: Aisha Howells
SUPERVISORS: Prof Marian Brandon, Dr Penny Sorensen
FUNDER: University of Suffolk

Childhood sexual abuse is a serious crime and a major public health issue. One of the most common types of child abuse, it is more prevalent among females who are three times as likely to have been subject to sexual abuse in their childhood (ONS, 2020). However, a great deal of childhood sexual abuse in England remains unidentified and shrouded in secrecy. Up to two-thirds of all sexual abuse occurs in and around the family home, and most often being perpetrated by people familiar to the victim. This research examines how mothers construct their understanding of their role as the mother of an abused child in the light of their own life experiences, which may also include abuse.

The study will involve 10-15 narrative interviews with mothers of children who have been sexually abused as children or adolescents, to explore their evolving experience of parenting their child in the light of their own childhood and experiences through life. This research will enable mothers to share their story and contribute towards building an understanding of the often hidden and complex narratives of mothers who may also have histories of abuse or oppression.

More needs to be understood about the complexities and lasting impact of sexual abuse of children in the family environment. Better understanding in this area should equip adults and professionals to see and respond to what is happening. Greater knowledge and understanding can help to create safer environments for children and better support for parents. Overall, this research aims to make a valuable contribution towards deepening our understanding of childhood sexual abuse in and around the family environment.

HOW DO TEAMS SUPPORT SOCIAL WORKERS TO MANAGE THE EMOTIONAL DEMANDS OF CHILD PROTECTION SOCIAL WORK?



PHD STUDENT: Sara Carder
SUPERVISORS: Dr Laura Cook, Prof Marian Brandon
FUNDER: UEA Funded PhD Studentship

Child protection social workers support and protect some of the most vulnerable children in society. This is emotionally demanding work and to date research has tended to focus largely on the coping mechanisms of social workers and their individual resilience. This study will establish how social work teams support front line social workers to manage the emotional demands of their work by undertaking an ethnographic study of two local authority frontline teams. By examining the everyday activities, relationships and interactions that take place within the team environment this study will seek to rebalance the focus from individual to team responsibility.

Early insights suggest that the current COVID-19 pandemic has significantly impacted on the way in which social work team's function. What appears to be currently missing from the regulatory guidance and empirical research is how the enforced lockdown and social distancing rules has shaped and changed social workers' experiences of their teams. This study will encompass the lived experiences of social workers in these unprecedented times.

The study will contribute towards a conceptual framework for training, team development, organisational learning and may inform national and local authority inspection processes. My motivation for this PhD topic stems from a curiosity about what enabled teams to thrive in a child protection environment despite the challenging nature of the work.

We were delighted to welcome five new PhD students this year – Sara Carder, Ruth Copson, Louise Hartley, Aisha Howells and Anne Murphy. Congratulations to Donna-Maree Humphery and Christina Carmichael who both passed their PhD vivas in the Spring of 2020.

THE EXPERIENCES OF PROSPECTIVE ADOPTIVE PARENTS ON PRE-ADOPTION TRAINING



PHD STUDENT: Anne Murphy
SUPERVISORS: Prof Elsbeth Neil, Dr Georgia Philip, Dr Laura Cook
FUNDER: ESRC SeNSS funded PhD student-ship

This study looks at how prospective adopters come to understand the needs of adopted children with a focus on the role of pre-adoption training.

Within the UK, adoption is used predominately as a child protection measure for children unable to live safely in their birth family. Adopted children are likely to have been exposed to or to be at risk of abuse and neglect. This means that adoptive parents need to be able to manage additional behavioural, educational and health needs in their children and to develop skills in coping with adoption-related loss and stigma, and the psychological and practical tasks of contact with birth family. There is a requirement for all prospective adopters to have intensive training as they are prepared to become parents to these children.

Much research in this area is based on retrospective interviews and does not provide detail on real-time changes that occur. This research builds on a previous study looking at the experiences of social workers delivering pre-adoption training. That study found social workers view the course as an opportunity to give adopters a realistic view of adoptive family life, needing a delicate balance to ensure that the material does not alienate or dishearten prospective adopters.

This study will use a qualitative longitudinal research design to walk alongside prospective adopters during their preparation. Prospective adopters will be interviewed on three occasions; before pre-adoption training, just after the training, and then three months later. The study aims to inform practice in pre-placement training through insight into the experiences of prospective adopters and their developing thoughts on parenthood.

HOW DOES SUPERVISION ENABLE SOCIAL WORKERS TO MAKE SENSE OF THEIR WORK?



PHD STUDENT: Mark Gregory
SUPERVISORS: Dr Jeanette Cossar, Dr Laura Biggart
FUNDER: UEA Funded PhD Studentship

Decision-making and judgement in child and family social work has been a growing area of interest, particularly since the high profile child deaths of Victoria Climbié and Peter Connelly. Sense-making is the process through which social workers select, filter and interpret information to inform judgements. Sense-making remains an under-explored process within the social work literature.

Supervision has been of increasing interest to social work researchers over the past decade. Despite the increasing interest, however, relatively little is known about how discussions between social workers and supervisors influence the way that social workers think through their cases.

My research uses a broad conception of supervision, seeing it as a situated practice that takes place not just in formal one-to-one meetings, but within everyday conversations in social work teams. My research has involved participant observation, audio recordings of supervision, and semi-structured interviews across four teams in two local authorities. Data analysis is ongoing, with an emerging interest in certainty and uncertainty in how social workers construct their cases, and in the interplay of personal, relational, and organisational factors in how social workers make sense of cases.

This research will further our understanding of how social workers reach judgements in everyday practice and how supervisory conversations contribute to this process, making an important and novel contribution to two growing spheres of research.

HARD TO TELL: HOW MALE SURVIVORS OF FEMALE PERPETRATED INTIMATE PARTNER ABUSE TELL THEIR STORIES



PHD STUDENT: Cassian Rawcliffe
SUPERVISORS: Prof Beth Neil, Dr Georgia Philip
FUNDER: ESRC SeNSS Funded PhD Studentship

The awareness of violence against women has put domestic abuse firmly on the agenda of social policy and legislation; less so the experiences of male victims. Stereotypes of men as strong and invulnerable, and the widespread understanding of domestic abuse by men against women, means male victims can feel their experiences are not accepted. This can stop them from talking about their abuse. Unrecognised abuse can continue for longer, increasing the risk of harm and fatal injury. Children who see and hear abuse between their parents are at greater risk of harm and of entering abusive relationships when they grow up, perpetuating cycles of abuse and violence.

Narrative Identity Theory research shows that how people talk about their experiences is important for recovery. Some ways of telling stories are linked to positive wellbeing, and others to poorer mental health outcomes. For men who suffer violence and abuse from their female partner, there is little opportunity to talk of their experiences. When they do speak about it, they are often not taken seriously limiting their opportunities to explore and make sense of their own stories.

This research uses in-depth auto-biographical narrative interviews to enable male victims and survivors to tell their story. Understanding how male survivors speak about their experiences, and what it means for their identity and mental health, is crucial to being able to support them and their families, potentially helping men to understand their experiences, leave abusive relationships earlier, work to protect their children, and help them to rebuild their lives.

Listening to men's stories in this way can help inform a deeper understanding of Intimate Partner Abuse of all genders, enriching public discussion, better informing the work of those who provide support, and making it easier for others to make sense of their own experiences.

EXPLORING THE EXPERIENCES OF OLDER MEN IN PRISON



PHD STUDENT: Rose Hutton
SUPERVISORS: Prof Jonathan Dickens, Dr Penny Sorensen
FUNDER: UEA Funded PhD Studentship

Older men are the fastest growing prison population in the UK, with the number of men over 50 almost trebling in the last 15 years. Although this can partly be explained by rising life expectancies, this has generally been attributed to increases in sentence length and late-in-life prosecutions. Despite this population rapidly increasing, prisons can fail to meet older prisoners' often complex needs and there remains no national strategy regarding the care and management of older prisoners (Prisons & Probations Ombudsman, 2017; Public Health England, 2017). Existing research has described older prisoners as receiving a 'double burden' where they are not only deprived of their liberty but also experience an additional punishment from not having their needs met (Turner et al., 2018).

This study aims to develop our understanding of the lived experiences of older men in prison, whilst also exploring the experiences of staff working with them. The research will draw on semi-structured interviews with older male prisoners and a small number of prison staff in prisons across the East of England. Data will be analysed using Charmaz's constructivist grounded theory. This research will provide a much needed contribution to the limited base of academic qualitative research in this area. It is also hoped that the findings will also be able to inform policy and recommendations for front-line practice within the prison system. The research also has wider theoretical implications, raising questions about what constitutes justice and the purposes of prison.

ENDURING RELATIONSHIPS & COMMITMENT: EXPERIENCES OF ADOLESCENT ENTRANTS TO FOSTER CARE AND FOSTER CARERS



PHD STUDENT: Emma Speer
SUPERVISORS: Prof Gillian Schofield, Dr Christine Cocker
FUNDER: ESRC SeNSS Funded PhD Studentship

Although adolescents are the largest group of young people in the care system, there is a lack of research acknowledging the challenges of fostering adolescent entrants; about the experience of foster carer commitment to adolescent entrants; and the experience of the young people. There is though, general evidence of the importance of supportive relationships in adolescence.

This research aims to develop conceptual and theoretical insights into how relationships and commitment are experienced by adolescent entrants and their foster carers.

Semi-structured interviews are being conducted with 10-15 adolescent entrants and the same number of foster carers. Some matched pairs of foster carers and adolescent entrants may be interviewed; however, the aim of these interviews is not to triangulate information between young people and the foster carers who care for them, rather it is to explore their individual experiences of the adolescent entrant/foster carer relationship, which could include past relationships. Grounded theory will be used for analysis and to yield new theory from the data generated.

This exploration of an undervalued and under-researched area of foster care practice will challenge the current policy preoccupations with organisational and service outcomes for children and young people in care, which equate placement endings with the end of relationships. Instead this study will assist in broadening, reframing and reconceptualising the notion of foster care for adolescents through the lens of committed relationships.

THE IMPACT OF PERSONAL ASSISTANCE ON RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN DISABLED PARENTS AND THEIR CHILDREN



PHD STUDENT: Nicola Jones
SUPERVISORS: Prof Jonathan Dickens, Dr Ann Anka

Parenting with the support of personal assistance is a growing phenomenon, yet there is scant research about its impact on family life. Little is understood about the experiences of both parenting and being parented with personal assistance, or how relationships between disabled parents and children are influenced by the ongoing presence of personal assistants (PAs).

This study addresses the research gap through empirical research with people with lived experience. Qualitative methods (semi-structured interviews and discussions/age-appropriate activities with children) examine how 29 participants recruited from disabled parents, children, and PAs, experience personal assistance, and its impact upon parent/child relationships. Verbatim transcripts were shared with adult participants as part of ‘member checking’. Rigorous thematic analysis identified key findings.

Findings shed light on the constantly evolving interplay between parents, children and PAs, revealing the intensity and complexity of relationships. PA support can meet parents’ practical needs, enrich family life and support close bonds between parents and children. Employing a PA can prevent children from becoming carers and alleviate children’s anxieties about their parents’ wellbeing, enabling them to focus on important learning and social activities.

Negative relationships can also develop; these can be disempowering and a barrier to positive parent/child interactions. PA presence can complicate family life, with parents and children sometimes feeling observed and judged. Teenagers spoke about the unwelcome intrusion of PAs.

The study provides a comprehensive and nuanced picture and a deeper understanding of the effectiveness of personal assistance in enabling disabled people to express their parenting choices. There are important new insights into the views of children who do not identify as ‘carers’.

GRANDPARENTS’ EXPERIENCES OF BECOMING AND BEING A SPECIAL GUARDIAN: AN INTERPRETATIVE PHENOMENOLOGICAL ANALYSIS



PHD STUDENT: Paul McGrath
SUPERVISORS: Prof Beth Neil, Dr Laura Cook

The use of Special Guardianship Orders (SGOs) by the Family Court to formally secure the legal status of children living with family and friends, as well as with some foster carers, has increased significantly since their implementation in 2005, and grandparents are the largest group of special guardians. Local authorities are now regularly recommending SGOs at the end of care proceedings for children who cannot live with their parents. However, only a small research base informs these decisions.

Current research shows that special guardianship orders can often lead to positive outcomes for the child and the carer; especially when special guardians have support from their wider family. However, the research also demonstrates challenges and complexities which are not well understood. The study aims to support the development of the understanding of the lived experience of being a grandparent who is special guardian.

Using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) the study analyses how grandparent special guardians make sense of their experiences through 18 interviews with 27 grandparents. The small sample size, although large for an IPA study, allows for an in-depth interpretation of the special guardians’ sense making of their experiences.

Early findings indicate there are five key areas in the experience of becoming and being a special guardian:

- The grandparents’ experiences of the child protection and court processes. The grandparents experienced the court processes as adversarial which impacted on the trust and ongoing relationships between the grandparents, the parents, and children’s services.

- Grandparents’ relationship with their adult child who was their grandchild’s parent. The grandparents often found this relationship difficult because of their adult child’s choices. This made parenting them into the future more challenging.
- Grandparents’ experience of parenting their grandchildren. This was an extremely complex parenting role which involved having to manage the impact of trauma on the child, contact and ongoing family relationships and the grandparents’ own vulnerabilities such as poverty, social isolation, ill health and aging.
- The grandparents’ transformation from grandparent to grandparent special guardian. The grandparents found it hard to switch roles from being the child’s grandparent to raising them full time. Although there were joys in bringing up their grandchildren they also could experience the loss of their future plans, free time and employment.
- The grandparents’ experience of support. The grandparents often had to overcome many barriers to accessing support which were either internal (e.g. a reluctance to trust children’s services, or feeling they should be able to cope), or external (e.g. not knowing entitlements to support, or no appropriate services being available).

Implications for social work practice and future research are currently being considered and early findings have been shared with policy makers, parliamentarians and practitioners.

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OUR MEMBERS

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MARIAN BRANDON (BA, MA, CQSW, PhD) is Professor of Social Work and Director of the Centre. She is a children and families specialist and has research interests in family support, child protection and multi-agency working.

JOHN CLIFTON (MA, CQSW PhD) is a Senior Research Associate. His main research interest is in men and fathers in adoption and child protection.

CHRISTINE COCKER (BSW, MTh, OXON, PG Dip, PhD, HSSM) is a Senior Lecturer in Social Work. Her research interests are lesbian and gay fostering and adoption and social work with looked after children.

SARA CONNOLLY (BA, MPhil, DPhil) is a Professor in Personnel Economics. Her research interests are in gender and the labour market.

LAURA COOK (BA, MA, MA, PhD) is a Lecturer in Social Work. Her research interests include the concept of professional judgement and the role of emotion in social work practice.

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OUR AIMS

To undertake research on a wide range of child and family issues across regional, national and international contexts.

To use research to advance our understanding of the development of children and the diverse nature and meanings of family life across the life course in a changing and multi-cultural society.

To advance our knowledge of the effectiveness and efficiency of services across the statutory, voluntary and private sectors.

To work in collaboration with, or on behalf of, child and family agencies in the statutory, voluntary and private sectors.

To develop and disseminate research knowledge which will inform and have an impact on policy and practice, enhancing



Centre for Research
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