

C4EO for the sector
from the sector



**The views and experiences of children and young people who
have been through the child protection/safeguarding system.**

Review of literature

And

Consultation report

July 2010



Overview and background

Action for Children were commissioned by the Centre for Excellence and Outcomes in Children and Young People's Services (C4EO) to seek the views of children and young people that have been through a child protection or safeguarding system; so C4EO can have a better understanding of interventions that work and why young people and their families are sometimes reluctant to take up social work support and what would be more effective ways of engaging them.

The work was planned with the National Children's Bureau (NCB) who are one of four partners¹ that form C4EO, and one that lead on the internal evaluation of the programme and as well as having the responsibility for ensuring that the views and experiences of children and young people inform the work of the centre.

The overall objective of the work was to give children and young people who have been through the safeguarding system and worked with social workers the opportunity to provide feedback about their experiences. This report will feed into the wider work of C4EO's safeguarding theme².

The work by Action for Children was undertaken in two parts:

- Part 1 – A literature review
- Part 2 – Consultation with young people

The report has been designed to enable C4EO to have a better understanding of the following:

- The interventions that work
- Why young people and their families are sometimes reluctant to take up social work support
- More effective ways of engaging with children and families.

The project has worked towards achieving the following outcomes:

- children and young people shared their views and opinions about their lived experiences of safeguarding systems
- children and young people gave ideas / made suggestions about the ways in which social workers' safeguarding practice could be improved
- C4EO understands what makes it difficult for children and young people to make use of social care services
- C4EO has a better understanding about effective practice that protects children living in highly resistant families where they may be suffering, or are likely to suffer, significant harm because of ill-treatment or the impairment of health or development due to abuse or neglect.

This report summarises the findings from the literature review and the consultation, with recommendations for improvement and change.

¹ C4EO is a consortium of four core partners: National Children's Bureau (NCB); National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER); Research in Practice (RIP) and the Social Care Institute for Excellence (SCIE).

² C4EO has 9 priority work themes. These are Early Years; Child Poverty; Disability; Vulnerable (Looked After) Children; Safeguarding; Schools and Communities; Families, Parents and Carers; Youth and Early Intervention.

Part 1

Literature review of studies and consultation post 2000 that cite the views of children and young people about their experiences of the social care system.

1. Introduction

“It’s important you talk to children.” (child interviewed by Brophy, March 2010).

- 1.1 Literature citing children’s views of the child protection system per se is limited. Consulting children about an area that is extremely sensitive and potentially traumatic for them is fraught with ethical dilemmas, such as those described vividly by Woolfson et al (2009). Furthermore, making contact with children in these circumstances is very difficult for practical reasons, for example, the need to gain parental consent and work with social worker who has many other pressing demands on their time. (Woolfson et al 2009, Wiffin 2010)
- 1.2 There are a few studies which have specifically addressed these issues, although the majority are now over 10 years old. Nevertheless the findings of these older studies are consistent with the messages from more recent research. Many of these messages are also echoed in work which, while not specifically addressing the views of children involved in the child protection system, bears relevance to the subject. These are studies of children and young people who were involved with professional sources of support.
- 1.3 The research suggests that children and young people have many fears about the repercussions of telling an adult that they are being abused or neglected. They fear that they will be disbelieved, blamed or punished, that telling will make things worse, and that the adults will take over and make decisions without consulting them. Sadly, they are often correct in this. The positive message from the research is that by and large, children feel that invoking child protection system does make things better, but it is less encouraging to find that, in general their fears about losing control are born out in reality.

2. The Literature Reviewed

- 2.1 An internet search was conducted using keywords such as “safeguarding” and “child protection” with the terms “children” “young people” “family” “views” “perspectives” and “consultation”. Specific searches of relevant websites e.g. research in practice, DfE, the Children’s Commissioners for England, Scotland and Wales, NSPCC, Family Rights Group and CAF/CASS were also undertaken.
- 2.2 The parameters of the review had been set to exclude sources written before the year 2000. It appears that this area has not been extensively studied over the last ten years. Although numerous literature reviews were identified which quoted the views and experiences of children and young people, very few of these were (a) recently published (b) specifically relating to children in the child protection system and (c) concerned with their experiences of the system itself rather than the abuse which they had experienced. The literature reviewed has therefore included a variety of sources:

1) Studies of children who have been subject to abuse and neglect, talking about their experiences (e.g. Childline). These give a vivid picture of the children's feelings about the abusive situation but less information about the system which tried to protect them. This range of sources does give us valuable information, however, about the barriers which children may experience in their initial contact with the child protection system.

2) Studies of help-seeking behaviour in children and young adults generally were also examined and provide useful information about the qualities of a helping service which children appreciate, and their concerns about seeking help from professionals.

3) Children's views on services generally. Some of these are about general family support services; however, other studies concern the views of children whose situations may well be considered as putting them in need of protection e.g. studies of children exposed to parental drug use, mental ill-health, and/ or domestic violence. Although these were not studies of children's experiences of the child protection system per se, it is reasonable to expect that some of the respondents may have experienced the child protection process, and their views on social work services may therefore have some relevance to the subject area.

4) A handful of studies examined children and families' views of the child protection process (Children's commissioner, Woolfson). Here too there are limitations in the data e.g. small sample size, limited geographical area etc. Some studies which set out with the intention of including children's views were unable to achieve this and had to be satisfied with collecting the views of parents e.g. Cleaver:

"the plan to include the experiences of young people had to be abandoned. The 17 families included only 3 young people aged 10 years and over; only one of whom it had been appropriate to interview." (Cleaver et al 2006)

5) There have been more numerous studies conducted in the past in which children's views of child protection intervention have been sought; McGee and Westcott 1996, who quote Barford, 1993, Berliner and Comte 1995, Farmer and Owen 1995, Roberts and Taylor 1993, Westcott and Davies 1996, but there appear to have been few conducted in the last 10 years. However some important texts from before the research study period will be referred to in this literature review where they have relevance to more recent findings.

2.3 This review considers the literature describing children's expressed views and experiences concerning various phases of their involvement with the child protection system:

- (1) Telling and help seeking
- (2) The investigation and assessment process
- (3) Decision making processes
- (4) Court processes
- (5) The extent to which children were able to influence decisions
- (6) Social work action and other interventions
- (7) Finally it examines the evidence about the extent to which children and young people are consulted about the child protection process, and the extent to which they would wish to be involved.

Telling and help seeking

The people to whom children turn for help

- 2.4 Featherstone (2004) examines in her literature review who children tell about their troubles and what the barriers are to telling. She found that the most common people for children to talk to about worries are friends, parents and siblings. Clearly when these people are the source of the abuse this limits a child's immediate options. Younger children will cite teachers as the first non-relation they might turn to for support, but older children and young people will increasingly turn to friends. Bennett and White (2004) interviewed 71 primary school children who identified a range of professionals they would consider helpful, including police, paramedics and fire officers (it should be noted that these children were not asked specifically about people they would turn to in the event of being abused). One child mentioned Childline and another "with some conviction, indicated social workers because they listen and give good advice and can talk to mum and dad to make things better."

Differences in help-seeking behaviour

- 2.5 Two large-scale surveys of help-seeking behaviour in teenagers and young adults were conducted by Get Connected and NFP Synergy. Both these surveys indicate that adolescents are much more reluctant to ask for help than younger children. Boys are almost seven times less likely than girls to talk to anyone else about their problems (Get Connected) and boys in lower socio-economic groups and young survivors of abuse from black and minority ethnic groups are also significantly less likely to access help and advice (Garvey et al). Hershkowitz et al (2007), cited by Stalker et al, found that disabled children were much less likely to disclose abuse than their non-disabled peers.

Barriers to telling

- 2.6 The studies of children and young people's help-seeking behaviour quoted are not all of abused children. They indicate, however, that there are many barriers to telling someone about personal problems. Studies of children who have been abused show how these barriers are compounded when the issue children and young people are facing involves abuse. Barriers to telling described in the literature include:

- Lack of awareness that the behaviour was abusive (Mariathan, Featherstone)
- Shame, embarrassment and self-blame (Garvey et al, Mariathan, Featherstone, Stein, Nelson)
- Stigma, loss of credibility, friends finding out (Garvey et al, Get connected, Tompsett et al, Nelson)
- The fear of loss of control and of people taking over (Garvey et al, Featherstone, Nelson)
- The fear of getting into trouble and of being blamed (Nelson)
- Getting someone else into trouble, or splitting the family up (Garvey et al, Mariathan, Featherstone, Cawson. The Scottish Executive),
- Loyalty, or feeling sorry for the abuser (Nelson, Cawson, Stein, Mariathan)
- Fear of not being believed (Garvey et al, Mariathan, Featherstone, Nelson)
- Access to someone to tell, lack of awareness of where to go for help (Garvey et al, Mainey et al, Featherstone)

- Concerns about whether that person would treat information confidentially (Garvey et al, Get Connected, Mainey et al, Mariathan, Featherstone)
- Concerns about whether the person would be competent to deal with the issue (Featherstone)
- Fear that telling would make things worse, that the abuser would be told that they had disclosed (Garvey et al, Featherstone, Tompsett et al, Nelson)
- Not being able to express oneself (Get Connected, Nelson)
- Belief in self-reliance, not wishing to burden others (Featherstone, Nelson)

Children's feelings after disclosing

- 2.7 How children and young people felt after they had disclosed abuse receives less attention from the majority of studies. Not surprisingly, the evidence is mixed and appears to be related to how they felt they were treated throughout the process, and how the individual social worker had responded to their disclosure (see the section on relationships with workers). In general, however, children and young people did appear to be glad that they had told somebody about the abuse and wished to reassure other children that telling an adult and getting away from the abuse would make them feel happier. (Mariathan, Humphries)

The investigation and assessment process

Understanding of the system

- 2.8 Compared to their views about disclosing abuse, there is little recent research into children's views about the processes which follow the disclosure. One of the most striking findings is that children and young people experienced the child protection system as unfamiliar and mysterious. They had no idea what was likely to happen and why, and there appeared to be little effort to inform or reassure them. Wiffin interviewed five young people and 19 family members as part of the Children's Commissioner for England's study and refers to the "powerful and traumatic impact upon young people and adults, particularly at the start of being involved with the child protection system." (Wiffin, 2010) She found that all the young people interviewed said that they did not understand the system they had been drawn into. Sanders and Mace (2006), who conducted an audit of how agencies in Wales implemented policy about engaging children in child protection processes, found that many workers described the system as "Not child-friendly."
- 2.9 Woolfson interviewed eleven children who were involved in child protection processes in Scotland and found that only one of them was previously aware of the system. He suggests that this indicates a need for more information in schools about the system itself, how to make contact and what might happen as a result (Woolfson et al 2009). An example of how information about a complex and unfamiliar process can be provided to children in an understandable and age-appropriate way – by other children – is given by Robson et al. (undated report)

Information provided to children and young people

- 2.10 The information provided to individual children about what was happening to them appears to be as unsatisfactory as general information about the child protection system. "Those who had never had a social worker before said the letters and the first contact did

nothing to stop their fears, as they did not clarify why someone was coming or what they would do when they got there.” (Wiffin 2010)

- 2.11 This is not, however, confined to the child protection system. In a rapid literature review for National Children’s Bureau, Mainey concluded that “a theme in the literature is that young people do not always receive information about services, and the information they do receive is not always child-friendly.” (Mainey et al 2009) Eight of the eleven children interviewed by Woolfson reported that they did not understand the process and were not informed of what was happening. “The typical first contact was when unfamiliar professionals arrived at their home.” (Woolfson 2009) This accords with the work of Westcott and Davies (1996) which, although falling outside the time frame for this literature review, is included because of its important contribution to an area in which there appears to be a paucity of research evidence. They interviewed fourteen children aged 6-18 about their experience of investigative interviews. Like the children interviewed by Woolfson, and in common with the findings of Sanders and Mace (2006), they reported the interview as something for which they were ill prepared. Social workers “just turned up” and the children felt it was “all too sudden.” (Westcott and Davies 1996)
- 2.12 Preparing, informing and involving children is something that gets forgotten in the urgency of a child protection investigation, but time spent in this way can colour the way they experience the whole process. Although Woolfson found that children were largely unhappy with the investigation process and seem particularly dissatisfied with the investigative questioning to which they are subjected, he also found that “those children who were involved and informed from the start had a more positive approach to the investigation even when they disagreed for the need for such intervention.”

The context of the interview

- 2.13 Nelson (2008) found that the venue for the interview was important to some young people, “I was offered to be interviewed in my house or in my school. I preferred my house – but obviously that wasn’t satisfactory either. They should have a local young people’s organisation or something.” Only 25% of Westcott’s sample had been offered a choice of venue, and of those who had not, one third would have preferred the interview to take place somewhere else. (Westcott and Davies 1996)

Who else was present?

- 2.14 Most children in Westcott and Davies’s study were accompanied in the interview by a parent or step parent, though only three could remember being given a choice about this, and five stated that they had not wanted the other person present. (Westcott and Davies, op cit) Even when a choice is offered, children need to feel free to state their true feelings, “they shouldn’t ask in front of your mum if you want your mum to be there at the interview... what can you say?” (Nelson op cit)

Interviewer behaviour and characteristics

- 2.15 Children report that, above all, they need to feel that the interviewer is listening to them supportively.

“She listened and was very sensitive towards the situation.” (Nelson)

“The way he asked me things, he comforted me.” (Westcott and Davies)

“She was kind and understanding.” (Westcott and Davies)

- 2.16 A telling finding from the research studies into children's experience of the investigative interview is the feeling, reported by many, that they were not believed. (Nelson, Westcott, Woolfson) McGee and Westcott state that "one young woman was later told the disbelieving stance was to find out if her allegations were true." It is suggested by Woolfson that it would be helpful to explain to children that questioning their account, for the purposes of clarity or evidence, does not indicate disbelief.
- 2.17 Westcott and Davies put forward a range of interviewer behaviours that would help young people in the interview context and these correlate closely with the attributes of a helpful person, described by children under fourteen in school, "the children valued friendly, sympathetic, understanding people ...as well as not blaming. ...the children seemed to value being reassured." (Bennett and White, 2004)
- 2.18 Another piece of behaviour which abused children say they would find helpful is for the interviewer to specifically absolve them from blame.

"No one ever said to us "what he did was wrong." They have to reassure children first that you didn't have to have that happen to you, that was wrong." Nelson, 2008)

"Don't go into your home with all guns blazing. They should say "You're not in trouble." (Nelson 2008)

"Professionals should hold the perpetrator accountable as an abusive father." (Humphreys 2008)

Medical examinations

- 2.19 Few studies reviewed make references to children and young people's comments about medical examinations, but McGee and Westcott (1996) provide a useful review of research in this area. Certainly it would appear, unsurprisingly, that medical examination, although necessary, can add to a child's negative experience of the investigative process:

"I think they should think about how they would feel if an ugly man was taking pictures of their bottom." (10 year old girl, quoted in McGee and Westcott)

- 2.20 The Scottish Executive report "It's everyone's job to make sure I'm alright" quotes a girl who had been distressed by being examined by a male doctor, who felt that she should have been given a choice of a female doctor. Certainly it would appear that in an area such as medical examination, which can so closely mirror the abusive experience, offering a choice in relation to the gender of the examiner would be one small step to help children feel more at ease.

Emotional impact of the investigation

- 2.21 The comments made by children and young people indicate graphically what a traumatic experience the investigation can be for them, and how "they felt they had been "abused" by the very system which was supposed to help them." (Scottish Executive, 2002) Westcott and Davies (op cit) describe children vividly recalling their feelings of being "nervous... scared... apprehensive, uncomfortable and upset, and some reported crying or shaking". For some, these feelings persist after the investigative interview, particularly if they are worried about the impact on others. As Woolfson describes, "the first few hours after the investigation began proved to be the most challenging psychologically".

He attributes this to the fact that this is the time when the child or young person knows least about what is going on, and may be very worried about what is likely to happen.

“I thought it was something worse than what he was talking about.” (Woolfson)

- 2.22 As a result of their anxiety, children may be unable to fully remember or understand what information is given to them. Woolfson suggests that information should be provided “fully, lucidly and in a child friendly way” and be repeated on subsequent occasions. This is supported by Mainey et al:

“Young people want information about what to expect...young people suggested this be given verbally and in writing and repeated after the upheaval.” (Mainey et al, 2009)

The assessment

- 2.23 Following, or as part of, a Section 47 investigation, social workers should carry out a core assessment. Few studies appear to have researched the child’s perspective on the assessment process, which is in itself interesting, given the emphasis placed on children’s views in the Assessment Framework for Children in Need. Mainey et al (op cit) state that they “found little literature on young people’s views on assessment processes” and that families had limited awareness of the referral and assessment processes generally. Cleaver (2006) was unable to interview children, but did ask families’ experiences of assessment processes, and found that only one third knew that an assessment had been carried out, though those who were aware of this did feel that they had been involved and understood in the process.

The decision-making process

Preparation for case conferences and other meetings

- 2.24 McGee and Westcott (1996) provide a review of studies which looked at families’ participation in case conferences, although as they point out these were largely conducted prior to the implementation of the 1989 Children Act. The majority of these studies did not examine the experiences of children and young people participating in the conference, but those that did look at this area found that the majority felt they were listened to and taken seriously. It was however commented that one study, conducted in Cleveland social services, found that children received patchy preparation. (Crookston and Smith, 1994, quoted in McGee and Westcott, 1996)
- 2.25 The situation seems not to have changed greatly. Sanders and May (2006) in their review of agency policy in Wales, found that time to prepare children was insufficient. They concluded that case conferences were a particularly child-unfriendly part of the child protection system and acted as a barrier to hearing children’s voices. Cossar and Long (2008) found that in their sample of 25 young people who had had a child protection case conference held about them, the majority had not seen an LSCB leaflet explaining the conference. None was offered the opportunity of taking an advocate or friend, and the majority felt they were not sufficiently informed to be able to decide whether to attend.

Attendance at case conferences

- 2.26 Not all children are offered the opportunity to attend case conferences about them. Sinclair and Franklin (2000) found that invitations to children to attend case conferences were increasing but were by no means common practice; however children who were offered the opportunity responded positively. They point out that disabled children tend to be consulted less, and this is confirmed by Stalker et al (2010) who found that disabled children are seldom involved, and there is little use of independent advocates for them.
- 2.27 Even when the opportunity is available, children often find it hard to participate fully in large, formal meetings full of professionals, especially when they are there to discuss sensitive and personal information. Woolfson found that children wanted to be present or have their views represented at child protection case conferences, but found it disconcerting and alienating to have large numbers of professionals present. He suggested having fewer people present at meetings which children were to attend.
- 2.28 This was echoed in Cossar and Long's findings:

"All these people were looking at you and it's like Oh my God and it was hard cos my mum was there..."(Cossar and Long 2008)

Young people interviewed in Cossar and Long's study thought the relevant people were:

"social worker and key worker from school, advocate and parents. That's all, not nurse and governors, lots of people there that don't need to be there." (Cossar and Long, op cit)

Having views heard

- 2.29 Children want to have their views heard in case conferences and to be consulted about what should happen to them. (Woolfson, Cossar and Long) The Scottish Executive report (2002) states :
- "The audit found that while professionals had children's best interests at heart, they often did not consult with children to determine what their best interests were. The views of children were often not fully considered at case conferences or were presented through third parties."
- 2.30 Cossar and Long found that young people gave a range of reasons for wanting to attend, including making sure that information was correct, getting their point across and helping to make decisions. They had positive views of review managers, who were seen as proactive in encouraging them to express their views, and felt they were independent. However some young people felt that they were not asked about key issues.(Cossar and Long 2008)
- 2.31 If they feel they are not being listened to, children may vote with their feet, and may thereby miss hearing important information or participating in important decisions. Cossar and Long found that some young people became frustrated with the conference and walked out, which replicates Woolfson's comment that "at times, misunderstandings occurred because the child or young person became so distressed they left the initial meeting before it was completed." Those who did not attend got very little information about what happened in the meeting (Cossar and Long) so children who feel they have

to remove themselves from the meeting are effectively depriving themselves of information.

2.32 Cossar and Long make a variety of suggestions to help children exercise real choice about the nature of young people's involvement, arguing that "attendance does not equal participation . Not attending should not mean not participating."

2.33 Some suggestions that children and young people have expressed are:

- We should own a child protection room and graffiti it
- Young people should be able to express their feelings
- An advocate to help people say what they want to say
- Don't ask about personal feelings
- Give the young person a chance to talk
- Young people valued social workers who visited beforehand and went through the report with them (Cossar and Long)
- Fewer attendees at meetings
- Requiring police officers to wear plain clothes (Woolfson)
- One young person, interviewed for the Children's Commissioner for England's study, felt that during the case conference, there should be someone to support the family. "There should have been someone there for my mum... I don't think she got a lot of support." (Wiffin, 2010)

The views of young people about the support they feel should have been provided for their parents are described in more detail under interventions.

The court process

2.34 Going to court is a worrying prospect for children and young people. They can feel that they are there to be blamed and punished, they may worry that they will say the wrong thing or let someone down, they may be anxious about re-visiting the abusive episodes in their lives, and they may dread coming face to face with their abuser.

"Another girl said she was frightened about going to court, and said she had vivid nightmares about having to see her parents in court." (Scottish Executive)

2.35 The review examined a report (Whitehead et al, 2009) concerning a survey of 232 young people who had experienced the children's hearings system in Scotland, and direct interviews with 13 of them. There was no suggestion that all of these children were involved with the hearings system because of child protection concerns, or indeed that any of them were; nevertheless their experiences are relevant to this study, not least because of the efforts which the Scottish system has made to ensure not only that children are enabled to participate fully in the process, but also to evaluate how effective these steps have been. This commitment to children's engagement in Scotland contrasts sharply with the lack of any similar work in the English administration.

2.36 Children interviewed for the Scottish study had all received written information about their hearing which they stated they understood. They also received a "Having your say" form to help them prepare what they wanted to say to the panel members, and all except one had completed this form. Children by and large felt they understood what the hearing

was for, felt confident they could speak to the panel and that panel members listened to them and took account of their views.

- 2.37 Nevertheless barriers to full participation were identified. There was a general consensus that the process was anxiety-producing and that, like case conferences, too many people were present:

“it’s just scary, it’s like everyone is sitting around you, and they are staring at you.” (Whitehead et al 2009)

- 2.38 The prospect of saying something which could upset another person was also mentioned by young people, as was the concern about people reading or hearing personal and sensitive information about them or their parents. In addition, the terminology used during hearings echoes the concerns expressed by young people quoted by Westcott and Davies about investigative interviews:

“ I think it’s how they ask the questions, we don’t understand the words.” (11 year old girl, quoted by Whitehead et al)

- 2.39 Brophy (2010) interviewed a larger sample of (51) children and young people with experience of the family court in England, a proportion of whom had experience of public law proceedings, although again this does not necessarily imply that they were victims of abuse within their families. This research was, however, not concerned with the entirety of their experience of the court process but specifically about their views concerning media access to family courts. Nevertheless the responses of the children and young people are telling. They expressed the view that court hearings address issues that are private, painful, humiliating and embarrassing for children; that they would be “worried”, “frightened” and “anxious” about talking to a child psychologist about ill-treatment by their parents, with 48% of those in the public law group worrying about letting their mum down; and that the only information which children felt should be published were “statements vindicating children from blame or responsibility for events leading to care proceedings. They wanted it known that they were not “bad” or “naughty” children and had done their best in awful circumstances.” (Brophy 2010)

- 2.40 Children who attend court as prosecution witnesses have an even more difficult time, according to a study by Prior, Glaser and Lynch (1997). Again, this study is outside the time frame for this review but merits mention because the six children who had been prosecution witnesses reported unanimously negative experiences of giving evidence and being cross-examined. The report finds that the 35 children interviewed as part of the study wanted some form of redress, and that their abuser should be held accountable. When this does not happen, children can feel bitterly disappointed:

“Many feel they have not been protected because the abuser was never prosecuted.” (The Scottish Executive)

“One key informant described the psychological and emotional damage done to young people when, on top of the abuse they have experienced, the perpetrators are not pursued, despite the young person’s testimony.” (Stalker et al 2010)

The extent to which children were able to influence decisions

- 2.41 “A key factorconcerns their position in the child protection system, and their lack of control over defining and naming what happens to them and what they want to happen to them.” (Featherstone and Evans 2004)
- 2.42 The decisions made at child protection case conferences, in court, and elsewhere within the child protection system, will have a profound effect on children’s lives. Children believe they have a right to participate in decisions such as where they will live and with whom, what contact they will have with the person who abused them, what information about them will be shared and with whom, how they will be made and kept safe, and what future involvement they will have from social services. Their wishes are not always granted.

Child protection register / Child protection plans

- 2.43 Children and young people feel strongly that they should be consulted about whether they are to be made subject to a child protection plan. (Woolfson op cit) The terminology of the “At Risk Register” may have been superseded by that of child protection plans, but for young people the stigma remains:

‘if you’re on the register then that’s a really bad thing. You don’t want to be on there, because that’s where all the naughty people go.’ (Cossar and Long, op cit)

It is significant that again the motif emerges of young people carrying the blame for the actions of their abuser.

- 2.44 Sometimes it is not just a matter of failure to consult. Woolfson found that, in his sample of eleven children, “six participants specifically noted that they were unaware they were on the child protection register until they were contacted to take part in this current study, and out of the five who knew they had been placed on the register at some stage, only two knew if they remained on it.” (Woolfson)
- 2.45 It seems perverse, in a system which relies on information sharing to ensure that children are kept safe, to neglect to share this information with people who hold a major interest in being kept safe and potentially unique knowledge to contribute.

Confidentiality and information sharing

- 2.46 Children are extremely concerned about “private” information about them being shared unnecessarily or freely, as can be seen by their responses to the issue of reporting in the family court. They often understand that information does need to be shared, but believe they should have some choice about when and how this happens:

“The most important thing is that they don’t go running (immediately) to tell someone and that they give the child some choices.” (Young woman interviewed by Nelson, 2008)

- 2.47 This is a concern expressed by young people in a range of settings, not only those receiving child protection services. Tunnard ‘s study of young people whose parents had mental health problems found that “where children are involved in discussions, it is important that information is not passed on without their knowledge.” (Tunnard 2004). Mainey et al, reviewing studies of young people also in settings other than the child protection services, quote Morgan in citing “young people’s belief that social workers

already have access to too much information” and Graham et al’s finding that “young people...valued being told, or involved in, decisions about inter-agency decision making”. (Morgan (2007), “Children’s messages on care: a report for the children’s rights director for England: Ofsted; and Graham, Mitchell, Day and Lewis (2007) “Young People’s views and experiences of specialist substance abuse services. (Natcen, quoted in Mainey et al 2009)

- 2.48 Humphreys (2008) states that confidentiality is of vital importance in developing trusting relationships with children who have experienced domestic abuse, because of fear of the perpetrator and stigma, but this is accentuated for families from minority ethnic communities by the additional issues of racism, isolation and cultural expectations.

Contact

- 2.49 The issue of contact with the person who abused them is a highly emotional one for children and young people. For some, they continue to feel love for the abuser and guilt that they have caused the separation (Maiathanan 2009, Cawson 2002) but for many, they fear any further contact with the abuser.

- 2.50 Humphreys et al found that children who have experienced domestic violence show marked anxiety in discussions about future contact, and they express strongly that they should be able to decide whether to have contact with the perpetrator. (Humphries, 2008) This is echoed by a young woman quoted by Nelson:
“Two social workers came to see me ...one guy only wanted to know when I wanted to see the abuser again. I kept saying “don’t you understand? I never want to see him again.” (Nelson op cit)

- 2.51 Even when children cannot be given a choice about these important decisions in their lives, they need to be given information about them:

“Social workers need to share the reasons for their decisions clearly and carefully with children and parents.” (Csci, 2006)

Social work actions and other interventions

- 2.52 Following the decision making process, the decisions made to keep the child safe have to be implemented. Some studies (e.g. Woolfson) have found that children are disappointed by actions not being pursued which they thought had been agreed. The theme of raised hopes and lack of follow-through is also discussed in some detail by McGee and Westcott (1996) Children are also distressed by actions taken that they were not expecting:

“One girl said her social worker had not told her she was being taken to foster carers. She was picked up by strangers....and had not been allowed to go home and collect her teddy bear or her clothes.” (Scottish Executive)

- 2.53 Children have expressed a range of views and opinions about services which have been provided, or which they think should have been provided, to them.

Support for parents

- 2.54 For many young people, particularly those whose parent has mental health difficulties, a drug or alcohol problem, a learning disability or a violent partner, their primary concern is not for themselves but for the parent. (Tunnard, Csci)

“The young people were unanimous that parents under stress needed help and support, and that it was in the child’s interest that it was provided – to prevent them being placed in care.” (Csci 2006)

- 2.55 The Csci report gives some clear messages about what children and young people say about support for families with children on the child protection register. In particular, children have considerable insight and recognise that change is necessary, but consider that professionals need to be much clearer with their parents about required changes, explicitly laying down “rules”, and providing necessary help for change to take place. Other studies found that children were very conscious of a lack of understanding from workers for their position and that of their parents.

“One young person whose mother was learning disabled said that she felt the social workers were not there for either of them, and didn’t understand what it was like to live on an estate where they were both bullied.” (Wiffin op cit)

Social work support

- 2.56 Children and young people have expressed many opinions about the services that they and their families receive. Inevitably, their opinions are affected by the quality of the relationship they have with the workers involved with them.

- 2.57 Qualities which young people think are important in social workers and support workers:

- Caring and understanding, knowledgeable and hard working (Wiffin, Nelson)
- Trustworthy and available (Humphreys, Bennett and White)
- Offering advice and suggestions, without forcing opinions on them (Tunnard)
- Accessible, and sticking with them over time (Nelson, Mainey et al)
- Culturally competent (Mainey et al)

- 2.58 One of the most frequent complaints from children and young people is the frequency with which their worker changes (Mainey et al, Wiffin) and Wiffin’s respondents contrasted this with the difficulty they had in changing their social worker if they felt they wanted to.

- 2.59 Children and young people appear particularly sensitive to what they perceive as double standards from social workers:

“How does she feel her constant lateness makes me feel? Worthless? Unimportant? Yes. If I am late, well, that’s different. They do not understand then.”(Wiffin)

- 2.60 They are also extremely sensitive to implied criticism or disrespect of themselves or their family

“The last social worker I had said, what’s your mum doing all day, sitting on her arse scrounging all the benefits?” (Wiffin)

- 2.61 Two studies identified that young people particularly value social workers who empathise with their fears about becoming involved in the child protection system, and encourage them to voice them:

“What we needed was...if they asked you first what your worries were...telling the police, being afraid of a parent, telling your mum, hurting your parent..” (Nelson 2008)

“she said to me, what’s your experience of social workers?... That helped me. She encouraged me to tell the bad things as well as the good” (Wiffin 2010)

- 2.62 Some children clearly felt supported by their social worker

“I trust my social worker to look after me.” (11 year old boy, quoted by Brophy (2010))

Others feel their workers do not have time to listen to them:

“They might say, we respect you, but then they don’t listen” (Wiffin 2010))

- 2.63 However, children and families express some understanding of the pressures on their social worker (Wiffin, Brophy) and recognise that the “system” does not always allow them the time to give to children, although “it’s always the same excuse about paperwork and sometimes I did think it was an excuse not a reason.” (Wiffin)

The outcomes of the child protection process

- 2.64 Much of the literature reviewed has been concerned with what the child protection process felt like to those caught up in it. It is also important to establish whether the children and young people considered that the system had made them feel safer. Here, the results are rather more positive. Featherstone found that “in spite of many concerns, it is important to note that nearly all children and young people involved in the system said they had few regrets about speaking out.” (Featherstone and Elliott, 2004) Woolfson’s study found that despite a general level of dissatisfaction with the process of investigation, nine children out of eleven reported that the support provided had had a positive effect on their lives. Humphreys (2008) also found that children’s messages to other children were that telling an adult and getting away from the abuse will make them feel better and happier.
- 2.65 A child who had been through the child protection conference system is quoted by Cossar and Long as saying “the good thing is that mum and M have finally got it in their heads that they have to sort themselves out, because M used to have a big drinking problem so that’s calmed him down a lot because he’s going to Drinksense.”
- 2.66 The outcomes are not universally positive however. Another of Cossar and Long’s respondents said:
“Having social services involved and sticking their beaks in puts mother in a mood, which is going to make her more likely to do something stupid like what happened in April.”
- 2.67 The literature review conducted as part of the report of the Scottish Executive also found a mixed response, with some saying they felt protected, but others feeling more vulnerable, either because their abuser had not been prosecuted or because they now faced different risks e.g. in residential care. (the Scottish Executive, 2002)
- 2.68 Although some children feel that the intervention of the child protection system had a negative impact, then, many feel that in the final analysis they are better off. It is,

however, deeply regrettable that the experience they went through was so negative for so many.

Children's participation

2.69 The fact that children want to be listened to and participate in decisions that affect them is referred to much of the literature reviewed (e.g. Featherstone and Evans, Sanders and Mace, Mainey et al, Tunnard, Woolfson, Cossar and Long, Sinclair and Franklin) Much of the literature has also made reference to the limited extent to which young people feel they are listened to and have influence over the process.

2.70 Sinclair and Franklin refer to the distinction between participation in matters that affect children as individuals and those that relate to them as a group. It is of interest how few research studies conducted in the last ten years have asked children directly about their experiences :

“There is very little research about children and parents' views about how they would seek help (and) what kind of support would be most helpful.” (Daniel et al 2009)

“There is an urgent need for more up to date research on how children experience the child protection system. Much of the research reviewed is now over ten years old.” (Featherstone and Evans 2004)

2.71 It is significant, too, that many of the research studies describe difficulties in recruiting children for their interviews (e.g. Cleaver et al, Wiffin) and of the sources identified, the majority of the samples of young people interviewed were very small. Thus children and young people's voices are only heard to a limited extent in the research about their participation in child protection processes, as well as in those processes themselves.

2.72 Nevertheless, children who did participate in research studies seem to have found this a useful experience. Brophy asked her sample how they had felt about talking about media access to the family courts. Their response was positive:

“I'm pleased we are being consulted”

“It's important you talk to children”

“I feel really lucky to be able to talk about it because I'm not just talking for myself, I'm talking for all the people in care or coming into care – on their behalf”

“I feel good. I've been able to express my opinion”.(Brophy, 2010)

3 Conclusions from the Literature Review

3.1 “It is evident from the research that children recollect problems and adverse experiences of their involvement at every stage of the child protection system. Many felt they were given few choices and little information, and the child protection process was experienced as being outside their control, with adults taking over.” (Featherstone and Evans 2004)

3.2 Although there are some examples of parts of the system trying hard to empower children (many of which, it has to be said, are from Scotland rather than across the UK, although recent steps by the Commissioner for England give cause for optimism) in general it has to be acknowledged that children are still experiencing a system which

they find difficult to understand and hard to express themselves in, where decisions are made about them and for them, and which causes them embarrassment and fear.

- 3.3 Some of the authors reviewed have offered suggestions about how to better prepare and inform children about the system they are about to enter, by providing child-friendly written information, by backing this up verbally, and repeating the information at a later stage. Others have described the qualities and characteristics that help children to feel safe, listened to, understood and respected. Still others have pointed out the importance of giving children choices, and involving them in decisions, about who they wish to accompany them to interviews, who should attend their case conferences and reviews, what information should be shared, what contact they should have with an abusive parent. The success of simple leaflets in helping children to feel confident in understanding and participating in the Scottish Hearing System provides an example of how a similar approach could be used for children attending a child protection case conference.
- 3.4 Despite their largely negative experiences, children continue to be prepared to participate, and wish to express their views and to contribute to decisions if they are given the chance. They are also prepared to use their experiences to help other children.

REFERENCES

- Bennett, Fiona and White, Julia (2004) : Consulting children under fourteen on their views of people who help them in times of difficulty. Edinburgh: NHS Education for Scotland
- Brophy, Julia (2010): 11 MILLION. The Children's Commissioner for England's report on the Views of children and young people regarding media access to the Family Court. The Oxford Centre for Family Law and Policy, Oxford University.
- Cawson, Pat (2002) Child maltreatment in the family. The experience of a national sample of young people. London : NSPCC ISBN 1842280139
- Cleaver, Hedy, Nicholson, Don, Tarr, Sukey and Cleaver, Deborah (2006): The Response of child protection practices and procedures to children exposed to domestic violence or parental substance misuse. Department for Education and Skills and Royal Holloway University of London
- Commission for Social Care Inspection (2006) Supporting parents, safeguarding Children. www.csci.org.uk
- Cossar, J and Long, C (2008) Children and Young People's Involvement in the Child Protection Process in Cambridgeshire – submitted to the Children's Workforce Development Council Feb 2008
- Daniel, Brigid, Taylor, Julie and Scott, Jane (2009) Noticing and Helping the Neglected Child – Literature Review DCSF Research brief DCSF-RBX-09-03
- Featherstone, Brid and Evans, Helen (2004) : Children Experiencing maltreatment: who do they turn to? London: NSPCC. ISBN 1842280457
- Garvey, Madden, Violi, Vitali, Spigelman and Tracey (2008): How do young adults seek help? The Vodafone Foundation and nfpSynergy. www.nfpsynergy.net
- Get Connected (2010) "What's Up?" www.getconnected.org.uk
- Humphreys, Cathy, Houghton, Claire, and Ellis, Jane (2008) Better Outcomes for Children and Young People Experiencing Domestic Abuse – Directions for Good Practice The Scottish Government.: www.scotland.gov.uk
- Mainey, Amanda, Ellis, Anthony and Lewis, Jane (March 2009) : Children's views of services A rapid review NCB

McGee , Caroline and Westcott, Helen L (1996) System Abuse: towards a greater understanding from the perspective of children and parents, Child and family Social Work, August 1996, vol 1 issue 3 ISSN 1356-7500

Mariathanan, Jeevi (2009) : Children Talking to ChildLine about Sexual Abuse. London: NSPCC ChildLine Casenotes

Nelson, Sarah (ed) (2008): See Us Hear Us – Schools Working with Sexually Abused Young People. Dundee: Dundee Young Women’s Centre (Trading) Ltd ISBN 978-0-9543464-9-2

Oldfield, Carolyn and Fowler, Clare (2004) Mapping Children and Young People’s Participation in England. The National Youth Agency.

Robson, Jacqueline (undated) The Common Assessment Framework: Children and Young People’s perspective. Action for Children and Gateshead Council.

Sanders, Robert and Mace, Sam (2006) Agency Policy and the Participation of Children and Young People in the Child Protection Process. Child Abuse Review Vol 15 issue 2

Sinclair, R and Franklin, A (2008) Young People’s Participation – Quality Protects Research briefing 3. Research in practice. www. rip.org.uk

Stalker, Kirsten, Green Lister, Pam, Lerpiniere, Jennifer and MacArthur, Katherine (2010) Child Protection and the Needs and Rights of Disabled Children – a scoping study. University of Strathclyde

Stein, Mike, Rees, Gwyther, Hicks, Leslie and Gorin, Sarah (2009) Neglected Adolescents- Literature Review London: DCSF Research brief DCSF-RBX-09-04

Stein, Mike and Hicks, Lesley (2010) Neglect Matters. A Multi-agency guide for professionals working together on behalf of teenagers Nottingham: DCSF publications

The Scottish Executive (2002) It’s Everyone’s Job to Make Sure I’m Alright. Report of the Child Protection Audit and Review. Edinburgh, the Stationery office.

Tompsett, Hilary, Ashworth, Mark, Atkins, Christine, Bell, Lorna, Gallagher, Ann, Morgan, Maggie and Wainwright, P (2009) The Child, the Family and the GP: Tensions and Conflicts of Interest in Safeguarding Children DCSF-RBX-09-05-ES

Tunnard, Jo (2004) Parental Mental Health Problems: Messages from research, policy and practice. Dartington: Research in Practice

Westcott, Helen L and Davies, G (1996) Child Perspectives on Investigative Interviews, British Journal of Social Work Volume 26 Number 4 ISSN 0045-3102

Wiffin, Jane (2010) The Children’s Commissioner for England’s report on Family Perspectives on Safeguarding and on relationships with Children’s Services. In-Trac Training and Consultancy.

Whitehead, Indiya, Henderson, Gillian, Hanson, Lucy, Lamb, Donald and Duru Edward (2009): The views and experiences of children and families involved in the Children’s Hearings System in Scotland. Scottish Children’s Reporter Administration www.scra.gov.uk

Woolfson, Richard C, Heffernan, Emma, Paul, Marianne and Brown, Morven (2009) Young People’s Views of the Child protection System in Scotland. British Journal of Social Work, bcp120v1—bcp120. Oxford University press

Part 2.

Experiences of child protection/safeguarding system – children’s and young people’s views

1 Introduction

- 1.1 Ensuring that children are kept safe is the most fundamental function of social work with children, young people and families. It is also a highly sensitive, complex and difficult area, with some families being characterised as ‘reluctant’ or ‘resistant’ to interventions. Recent research by Jane Wiffin, mainly based on interviews with adult service users, has attempted to unpick the idea of ‘resistance’ and identify effective ways of working through exploration of the views and lived experience of families.
- 1.2 In commissioning this research with Action for Children, C4EO seeks to better understand interventions that work and what doesn’t, and how social workers can be most effective in engaging with children and young people where there is a safeguarding issue. This research puts the views of children and young people at the centre.
- 1.3 Action for Children is the largest provider of family support services in the UK and has a long history of work which focuses on partnership with families. Listening to the voice of children and young people is at the heart of this work. Our Participation Strategy ensures a strong culture of participation in all of our work, so that children and young people are involved in the work done with them, in all decisions affecting them, and in shaping the services that we deliver. Our services foster strong and trusted relationships with children and young people who have experienced social work interventions – both our own and those of statutory agencies – and we are well placed to gather and represent those views.

2 Methodology

- 2.1 Young people were prepared by project staff to enable them to take part, and advance information was provided to them about the aims of the research. Information required by the research commissioned by C4EO was distilled into questions appropriate to the children and young people involved, beginning with how they came to be involved with social work and covering their experience of social workers, what they have liked and not liked, and their ideal social worker. In-depth interviews were arranged taking up to 40 minutes each. Young people received some advance information about the content of the interviews.
- 2.2 Young people were assured that what they had to say was important and would be written into a report with the aim of influencing practice, but that their identities would be kept confidential. They were also assured that, since the research would cover sensitive areas, they did not have to talk to the researcher about anything they were unwilling to share. It was explained to them that if any current safeguarding concern was raised by them in the course of the interview, the interviewer would need to share this information to make sure that they and anyone else at risk were kept safe, and each young person had the opportunity to talk to their support worker following their interview. Children and young people received certificates to acknowledge their contribution to the work, and a voucher to thank them for taking part. A young people’s version of this report was also supplied to them.

3 The children and young people who took part

- 3.1 9 children and young people took part. Their ages were between 6 and 16 years, with the average age being 11 ½. There were 5 females and 4 males. All were white British. None had a physical disability, but one young person identified himself as having ADHD.
- 3.2 All of them had experienced safeguarding and social work interventions, and were from families being supported by the Family Intervention Projects (FIP). FIPs are small, community-based services working intensively with families for a limited period of time. The families involved are usually affected by a range of issues and FIPs aim to reduce risk by working on specific targets such as maintaining a tenancy or reducing anti-social behaviour, as well as practical support and parenting work. Four Action for Children FIPs in the North West of England were involved: Assfam in Salford, Foundations in Greater Manchester, Blackburn with Darwen and Hyndburn FIP.

4 Children and young people's views

4.1 Becoming involved with social work/safeguarding

4.1.1 How their family became involved with social work

Most of the young people had been involved with social care for less than two years and were living with their family or a member of the extended family. In some cases the family accommodation was provided by the FIP. They identified a range of issues affecting their family including alcohol problems, illness, family break-up, non-school attendance, being harassed by gangs, trouble with other families, offending, unemployment, child sexual abuse, rape, bullying and domestic violence. One young person explained that there was a difference between parents 'not coping' with the children and other pressures on the family:

"It's not my mum's fault, she can cope with the kids, but not the problems around her."

Sometimes young people identified that an incident or series of incidents had sparked the involvement of Social Services:

"Me and my brother were messing about and he got in trouble with the police . . . mainly it was my brother . . . with me it was only two or three times."

"My sister was missing for five days . . . then we all got put into child protection because they thought we were all at risk."

Younger children in particular were not always sure how their family came to be involved, and not all referred to the safeguarding dimension:

"I think my family moved here to get my family back together again. My brother wasn't going to school, I used to be bullied in school, and I'm not sure what happened before we moved here."

It is clear that children and young people see social work intervention in the context of a wide range of issues affecting them and their family.

4.1.2 *Experiences of the child protection system*

Those who recalled and talked about this said they had been anxious about the involvement of large numbers of professionals talking about them, lack of information, and adults not listening to them:

“There was a child protection conference and there were comments from everyone involved with us - doctor, dentist, teachers, everybody.”

“There was a child protection investigation when I hurt myself. I didn’t like it as there were too many policemen accusing me of someone hurting me when I had hurt myself. There were too many people involved. It would have been better if I had to speak to less people – it was embarrassing.”

“I didn’t attend the conference, it was when I was at school. I felt nervous because my teachers went to tell them what I was like, it felt weird because I didn’t know what they had said about me.”

4.2. **Young people’s views on social work involvement**

4.2.1 *Having a social worker*

Having a social worker was a fairly recent experience for most of the young people. Most had had only one or two social workers but one reported having had “lots, I don’t know why.” Some reported not knowing what to expect:

“Having a social worker didn’t feel normal at first, I didn’t know anyone who had one.”

“Friends asked me why I had a social worker and what they were for, which felt weird.”

Some had heard negative views from other people:

“I heard about nasty social workers from my friends, they are always butting into families.”

“There are these myths that social workers are nasty, they harass you.”

4.2.2 *Positive experiences of social workers*

Most of the young people’s views on the social workers they had been involved with were overwhelmingly positive, and all had had positive experiences. Young people generally distinguished between their current Action for Children support worker and social workers from Social Services, but they talked very positively about social workers from both the voluntary and the statutory sector:

“Most people think social workers are coming in to be nosy, but we thought it was nice that she was helping us.”

“The worker I have now, I really think a lot of him.”

“The social worker who came to see us was kind, thoughtful, very nice.”

Only two reported negative experiences, but almost all were able to identify characteristics that they wouldn't want a social worker to have (outlined in section 4).

4.2.3 *Different approaches*

In the young people's experience social workers varied in personality and approach:

"I feel like they [two different social workers] were from two different worlds."

"Some social workers are really stressy but mine is good."

Some young people explained that different social workers had different roles at different stages in the safeguarding process, and this affected the way they worked:

"It was a short term contract to make an assessment on us but that meant she didn't get to know us. It wasn't like she was a different kind of person, the job she was doing was different. The next social worker took the time to get to know us much better."

"[Our first social worker] was more enforcive – you have to do this and you have to do that – I realise that that was to protect us."

4.3 **Things social workers do that help**

Young people's comments on this fell into six key areas: the way their social worker talked and listened to them and kept in touch; providing practical help and sorting out problems; getting them involved in activities; being positive and providing fun; getting on with the serious and important things; and helping with behaviour.

4.3.1 *Talking and listening*

All the interviews reflected that young people felt it was important to have a social worker who was easy to talk to. This involved being respectful and not talking down to the young person, offering choices, giving explanations, being calm and having an informal manner.

"Speaking to me like I am an adult."

"Offering me choices and advice, and letting me take responsibility for my choices."

"She always speaks as if I've got a choice."

"Explaining the child protection investigation to me"

"She speaks calmly and stays calm, this is good as it teaches me to stay calm too."

"Talking to me nice and not stressing me."

"My worker is not formal, she can talk to me."

"Listen to me, don't talk down to me."

Creating the right relationship and setting so that young people can talk about problems was seen as crucial:

“I have one to one chats so I can get all my problems out.”

“I can tell them anything so the things I tell them can get sorted out.”

“I don’t mind being alone with my support worker.”

Keeping in touch regularly was also seen as important:

“Regular contact, just a phone call to see how you are getting on. We’re in touch every two days; it really helps me to talk through what I’ve been through.”

“She helps me by asking if I’ve had any breakfast.”

“She comes to visit us, she sees us a lot.”

4.3.2 *Practical help*

Practical support both for themselves and their families was a major theme for all of the children and young people who were interviewed. Support ranged from helping with household items to helping parents plan for everyday needs, intervening with other agencies, and supporting parents and young people with other agencies. Asking if there is anything the young person wants help with is also important.

“Asking me if I want help with something . . . willing to help with anything you struggle with.”

“She talks to my mum and helps everyone. Like budgeting, and she had her benefits stopped, our worker helped her get what she was entitled to.”

“My bed was broken, she helped me get a new one. She arranges things for my mum so we’re not in a mess trying to do things at the last minute. It has taken a lot of pressure off my family.”

“She is clever, she helped us with the television.”

“She helped stop the bullying in school, she went to see the head teacher to stop it and now I am much happier.”

“I was being late for school because I was waiting with my sister for her school bus, she organised transport for my sister so she is safe and I’m not late.”

“Offering to come to meetings and interviews, it really helps me as I sometimes get nervous and I don’t always make myself clear.”

4.3.3 *Getting us involved in activities*

Involvement in activities was also a major theme for all interviewees. This may reflect more on their experience of intensive FIP support work than on social work, but most were in no doubt of the value of activities and could point to ways in which their life had improved as a result. Doing activities with the young person also helped to engage them with the work.

“Our worker helps us to get out more, encouraged us to go swimming, it’s important because my dad just likes to stay in but it’s helped us do things together as a family.”

“Getting me into activities and sports, it helps me because it calms me down.”

“She does activities with me and helps me do jobs and cooking and stuff.”

“We go to football matches, bowling, stuff like that. It’s helped my confidence. It’s helped me make friends, I didn’t have any friends where I lived.”

“I wasn’t going out of the house before I had a social worker. Now I’m getting out more and my school work has improved.”

“My ideal social worker would be based in a bike shop so we could ride the bikes often and it wouldn’t be boring.”

“She helps me by playing with me.”

“It makes me feel happy when we do art.”

4.3.4 *Positive attitude and fun*

Perhaps it should not be a surprise that being happy and fun were seen as important for most of the interviewees:

“She does the work in a fun way, she gets along with everybody.”

“If they are a happy person it helps the young person to be happy.”

“They should not be too serious or formal, not be a wet blanket or too boring.”

“Try to be happy and smiling, it makes other people smile.”

“If they have a negative attitude it has a negative effect on you.”

Kindness was also a personal quality mentioned by some young people.

4.3.5 *Getting on with the important things*

Young people appreciated that there were serious and important issues affecting their family, and appreciated that their social worker had addressed these in a straightforward manner.

“There were some really important things that had to be sorted out at the time, and she just got on with them and gave us information.”

“He tackles a problem bit by bit so it will get done.”

“She is very helpful with practical and serious things.”

Getting on with the important things was not seen as contradicting the “fun” comments; One young person explained that a balance could be achieved:

“Do the things the young person wants to do, and find a way to do the work that needs to be done as well.”

4.3.6 *Help with behaviour*

Some young people recognised that their social worker had helped their behaviour. In some cases they valued that the social worker modelled positive behaviour that their parent/s did not exhibit:

“She has helped me with my attitude, I used to swear at my mum and the social worker taught me not to.”

“She teaches me right from wrong.”

“She helps me to be calm, my mum is not calm so I can learn from my social worker.”

4.4 **Things young people would like social workers to do differently**

4.4.1 *Keep us involved and informed*

Young people reported not always knowing what was going on, and feeling better when they did know:

“It felt a bit mysterious, not scary, but I wondered what was going to happen. As things went along I felt much more comfortable with it because it was explained to me . . . now we have meetings every month so I know what’s been going on.”

“She didn’t give me information about the conference, she thought I was too young or wouldn’t understand. When I read the report I found there were a lot of things she hadn’t told me about.”

“Let me know all the information, don’t keep it from me. If I don’t understand, take the time to explain it to me.”

“Don’t shout, explain stuff.”

4.4.2 *Work with the whole family*

Young people felt social workers should keep in mind the effect on all of the family members when they were working with one child or the parents.

“Our worker would boss my mum and dad around. Not explaining, but telling them. It felt weird to have them undermined. It was confusing for me that they weren’t in charge any more.”

“They did a lot of things to help my sister but I had to work things out for myself. If you’re working with a family don’t leave anybody out.”

“They need to take the child out of the family to talk one to one. Sometimes I’d be worried I was going to say something that would upset my mum.”

The point was also made that they should work with the support links that exist between family members:

“My sister confides in me. She wouldn’t tell the social worker stuff but she would tell me so I could say things on her behalf. The social worker didn’t like this . . . she wanted her to say it . . . they should be open to listen to what other people in the family might say on their behalf.”

4.4.3. *Build our trust*

“They need to take the time to get to know me. So they are someone I can open up to and feel safe talking to about a personal problem.”

“It feels weird to talk to someone about very personal things if you don’t know anything about them.”

“We felt she was butting in and she was nosy about our private business, personal things, questions we didn’t want to answer. So we didn’t talk to her. Then she would say to other social workers that we wouldn’t tell her anything. She tried to get our case moved up, telling other people it was more serious than it was. If she hadn’t gone behind our backs we would have trusted her a lot more.”

“You should take them on an activity so they don’t feel they’re talking to a stranger.”

4.4.4 *Put themselves in our shoes*

“They need to think like a teenager.....think about what things are important to you.”

“They should treat us they way they would want to be treated, not like a little kid.”

“Do what suits the young person not just what suits you.”

4.4.5 *Don’t tell us what to do*

“They shouldn’t say don’t do this, don’t do that, they should advise us and let us make choices.”

“They should try and persuade me what’s good for me, not tell me.”

“She was always telling us what to do. I felt like she was trying to control my life so I chose not to talk to her that much; she made me nervous.”

“I’d just ignore them if they stressed at me, told me what to do or told me off.”

5 **Conclusions from the consultation**

5.1 The quality of the relationship between the social worker and the young person is clearly key, and this will determine the effectiveness of the work. As well as the social worker’s personal characteristics such as being positive, kind, easy to talk to and so on, offering practical help to the family and getting involved with the young person in activities help to build the relationship. Where young people felt uncomfortable with a social worker they tended not to talk to them, and this would affect the quality of an assessment – as not all

the young person's information would be known, and non-communication could be interpreted in different ways - and therefore the quality of any intervention. The time needed to build an effective relationship does not sit well with the urgency of safeguarding assessments.

- 5.2 However, what the young people have said does point out many characteristics of good practice which should feature in any intervention, such as keeping the young person informed, giving advice and choices, offering explanations, considering the whole family, openness, and seeing the young person's perspective.
- 5.3 There are a number of parallels with Wiffin's findings, particularly around the importance of relationships and the time to develop them; good communication and being honest; keeping in touch; showing respect; workers showing that they care; an informal approach; a family focus and practical support. Both studies flag up that young people and families experience social work practice as inconsistent.
- 5.4 The young people involved in this study were users of projects working intensively with families with multiple problems. They tended to see the whole range of problems affecting their family rather than the safeguarding issue in particular, and identified a wide range of ways in which social workers helped and a range of positive outcomes. This suggests social workers need to take a holistic approach to families and the way they see the pressures affecting them, rather than focusing on one urgent presenting issue. However, if we are to truly acknowledge what young people say about what works – including the importance of basic practical help, activities and fun – we may need to more radically re-imagine what social work is all about.

Recommendations

Based upon findings from Part 1 and Part 2

1. **Young person's guide to the safeguarding system:** It is evident that children and young people who enter the system, do not understand it, nor do they know how to access information about child protection processes. A guide for children and young people should be developed to help them to understand safeguarding systems. The suggested content would be as follows:
 - How to tell
 - Jargon buster
 - Safeguarding stages and what to expect at each stage
 - Explanation of who's who
 - Guide to opportunities for 'having your say'
 - Forums for decision making – Conferences, Reviews, Court
 - You are not to blame
 - Your rights
 - Your choices and how you can influence decisions
 - Supportive people – where to go for advocacy or support and accompaniment
 - Information sharing – what are others asked and how much are they told
 - Confidentiality
 - Complaints – what to do if you are not happy with the service that you receive

This should be written in child friendly language and where possible, young people should be involved in the production of the guide. This is not intended to substitute the dialogue that takes place between the social worker and the child to ensure that the child understands and is kept informed, it is intended as a supplement that the child can read and consider in their own time, with the assistance of a carer or supporter if needed.

2. **A 'how to tell' guide:** it is evident that the first stage of telling someone/asking for help can be a very traumatic and confusing period for children and young people. A 'how to tell guide' developed in two age appropriate versions, one for primary and one for secondary schools would make a useful resource, that can educate and empower children of all ages to tell their story and share their concerns in a non threatening and comforting environment.
3. **Social work training/good practice:** when social workers are being trained, more emphasis should be put on **a)** the importance of involving children and young people in the safeguarding processes, enabling them to make their choices and decisions, however small in the scale of the investigation/process and **b)** on good practice and skills on how social workers can communicate and engage with young people e.g. they should take the time to ensure that children and young people are prepared for and understand what is happening during a safeguarding process and are consulted at all stages; children's choices and preferences should be ascertained when they are spoken to alone, allowing them the freedom to make choices away from parents or carers who may potentially influenced them.
4. **Further research:** there is a distinct lack of recent research evidence (last 10 years) into children and young people's experience of safeguarding systems, and the findings from this project have been based mostly upon historical research and consultation with a small sample of children and young people accessing Action for Children services. Consideration should be given to how further understanding of children's experience of safeguarding systems can be achieved.

Appendix

Interview questions for consultation with young people

1. Can you tell me your life story? What happened to put you in touch with us?
2. Have you got a social worker or any kind of care worker? What are they like?
3. What do they do that helps you?
4. Is there anything that you'd like them to do differently?
5. If you could pick your perfect social worker, what would they be like?
6. Is there anything else you'd like to tell me?