

Organisational framework

For developing effective
relationships with vulnerable
parents to improve outcomes
for children and young people



as long as it takes

Context

Previous research and evaluations show that developing an effective professional relationship makes a real difference in improving outcomes for service users. No matter how programmes and funding may change, it is the human relationships that are ‘core to the delivery of effective services,’¹ yet too often they are overlooked. The Munro review² also highlighted the importance of professional relationships in improving outcomes for families and the skills and experience of social workers in being able to achieve this. Developments in other parts of the UK including a strategy for social work

reform in Wales³ and the Children’s Hearings Act legislation in Scotland⁴ are underpinned by the importance of professional expertise and knowledge in improving outcomes for children and young people.

York Consulting were commissioned by Action for Children to undertake research to articulate how Action for Children professionals develop effective relationships with parents and how this makes a difference for children and young people. Three key outputs have been produced from the research:

Output	Purpose
Skills framework	The skills framework identifies the qualities, experience, skills and knowledge that are essential to developing effective professional relationships with vulnerable parents in order to improve outcomes for children and young people. This is across three broad stages of relationship development – building rapport with parents, identifying needs and meeting needs.
Organisational framework	The organisational framework identifies organisational qualities that support the development of effective relationships between practitioners and vulnerable parents. It also provides examples of how Action for Children services are delivering these organisational qualities.
Final study report	The final study report draws on the literature review and case-study evidence to outline the key aspects and competencies required by practitioners to deliver an effective relationship with vulnerable parents. It also provides examples of how Action for Children services are delivering effective relationships with vulnerable parents.

1 Deep Value: A Literature Review, Kate Bell and Matthew Smerdon, Community Links, February 2011

2 The Munro review of Child Protection: Final Report A Child-Centred System, Professor Eileen Munro, May 2011

3 Sustainable Social Services for Wales: A Framework for Action 2011, Welsh Assembly Government

4 Children’s Hearings (Scotland) Act 2011, Scottish Parliament

Developing the organisational framework

The organisational framework has been developed using evidence from a comprehensive literature review and in-depth case study research in five Action for Children service contexts across the UK. The latter explored (across a range of service contexts) how Action for Children is delivering effective relationships with parents and the key facilitators and challenges in establishing good relationships.

The research identified a number of organisational qualities that were felt to support the development of good relationships. The organisational framework describes these qualities and the role they play in supporting the development of effective parent-practitioner relationships.

The organisational framework is split into three sections as follows:

Organisational level:

1. Strong management commitment and ethos
2. Practitioner training and development
3. Effective supervision
4. Creating a welcoming environment

Delivery level:

1. Team development and support
2. Flexible delivery
3. Facilitating multi-agency services
4. Consistency in approach to working with parents

Family level:

1. Supporting service accountability
2. Strong assessment process
3. Outcomes-focused practice

Under each theme, we address three key questions:

- ▶ Why is this feature important in the development of effective relationships?
- ▶ What should services be doing?
- ▶ How is Action for Children achieving this?

Family and service context

We recognise that there are also external factors that may influence the relationship between parents and practitioners. In particular:

- ▶ the motivation of parents to enter into support
- ▶ parents' acknowledgement of issues and capacity to change
- ▶ conflicting motivations to change within a family
- ▶ parents' attitudes and beliefs about services, associated professionals and expectations of outcomes

- ▶ service context
- ▶ level of family need
- ▶ the stage of the relationship between parents and practitioners

Neither the organisational nor skills frameworks are intended to comment on how these external factors influence the type of qualities, skills and knowledge required by practitioners. The final study report does, however, explore how these factors can influence the relationship between parents and practitioners in more detail.

Organisational qualities

Organisational level

1

Strong management commitment and ethos:

Creating an environment in which clear goals, structures and ethos maximise the ability of practitioners to achieve positive outcomes for children, young people and families

?

Why is strong management important in the development of effective relationships?

Action for Children managers and practitioners report that developing a service culture whereby practitioners feel supported, trusted and empowered is helpful in creating strong relationships with parents. An 'open door' management approach helps create an environment which is supportive to practitioners having new ideas, and encourages ongoing communication. Action for Children managers play a key role in ensuring that practitioners focus on actions that lead to outcomes for children and young people. The importance of strong, open management in a multi-agency environment is reinforced by research such as Moran et al (2007), which highlights the time-consuming and 'trial and error' nature of learning between agencies. These contextual features make supportive management practices more important because it is necessary to understand the 'reality' in order to strengthen organisational approaches and strategies to support parents. The research suggests that this can best be achieved through open and ongoing consultation with front-line workers.



Services should:

- ▶ have clear organisational values and a commitment to delivering effective, outcome-focused services
- ▶ create a supportive working environment that facilitates open communication across team members and encourages ongoing practitioner training and development
- ▶ develop relationships where managers trust practitioners to act autonomously
- ▶ have case loads that allow time for practitioners to develop meaningful relationships with parents
- ▶ establish an appropriate balance between contact time with families and organisational requirements (paperwork/monitoring)



How is Action for Children achieving this?

Children's centre: The Action for Children manager encourages practitioners to make 'on the spot' financial decisions, eg arranging a taxi, or booking a place in the crèche for a parent or child if she is out of the office, rather than holding up such decisions which may be detrimental to practitioners' establishing effective relationships with parents. Providing this autonomy helps practitioners to react quickly to situations, maintaining momentum and demonstrating action to families.

Intensive family support service: The practitioner team are positive about the autonomy and the trust they are given to manage and deliver their case-loads on a daily basis. The key workers within the service have clear professional boundaries within which they operate, but are given opportunities by managers to take an adaptable and creative approach when working with families. Practitioners recognised that support was available from the management team if required but also that they would be 'reined back in' if necessary. Practitioners have monthly supervision and family support plans are reviewed (with supervisors) on a six-weekly basis to ensure that support is continuing to meet families' needs.

Early intervention service: There is a clear commitment from service managers to deliver effective services that focus on improving outcomes for children, young people and families. They have observed that if practitioners work with enthusiasm then this generally filters down to families and other agencies. Action for Children managers are expected to lead by example, showing the same commitment and ethos in developing effective relationships. Practitioners have also found having a balanced caseload extremely helpful – it means that more time is spent with each family, and practitioners have time to understand the issues within the family and how best to address them.

Early intervention service: The service manager has supported the evolution and development of the team by always being clear about what their aims and objectives are, what they want to achieve, and having a focus on outcomes for children and young people. The service manager's approach has engendered an environment where team members feel they can bring ideas, and that will be open to what they think and feel.



Other useful information

Moran P, Jacobs C, Bunn A and Bifulco A (2007), Interagency working in an early intervention social services team, *Child and Family Social Work*, Vol 12: 143–51

Organisational qualities

Organisational level

2

Practitioner training and development

Identifying and supporting the development of the skills, qualities and knowledge of practitioners to deliver effective support to families

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Why is practitioner training and development important in the development of effective relationships?

Ongoing training and development is important as practitioners work within varied family contexts, often with complex relationship dynamics and within a multi-agency environment. Practitioners therefore require a wide range of skills, knowledge and experience to effectively and safely develop relationships with families. Several research studies highlight the importance of training and development. Moran et al (2004) emphasises that successful interventions are developed from a strong theory base, with clearly stated aims, while Lipsey and Wilson (1998) place great importance on appropriately trained and skilled practitioners to achieve effective outcomes. The training required is both generic and specialist, for example, Fletcher (2008) outlines the importance of practitioner training in order to ensure the effective engagement of fathers.



Services should:

- ▶ effectively use a training needs analysis
- ▶ provide informal training opportunities including shadowing, practice sharing, attending local forums and groups
- ▶ cascade learning down to other practitioners to build team experience and knowledge
- ▶ proactively seek training opportunities through developing links with other agencies
- ▶ undertake joint training with partner agencies enabling the sharing of skills and experience
- ▶ encourage practitioners to identify and engage in development opportunities
- ▶ provide training that is focused on effective processes, including theoretical knowledge, which can be applied in practice



How is Action for Children achieving this?

Early intervention service: Practitioners use Action for Children resources to develop their learning and practice (for example, on particular strategies and approaches such as reflective learning). These are online or physical books that are accessed as frequently as needed/wanted with free delivery and can be kept for a month. Practitioners felt that this element of Action for Children's infrastructure supported their professional and personal development. Combined with opportunities to speak with line managers and resolve issues through discussions with other practitioners, practitioners felt they are supported to build their own skill set to effectively engage different parents in different circumstances.

Intensive family support service: Team meetings are used to share understanding and update staff on key policies and procedures. There is also a 'compulsory reading file' in the office which all practitioners have to read. Updates on policies are also communicated through the intranet.

Intensive family support service: Managers proactively seek training and development opportunities for practitioners through the links they have developed with the local authority. Practitioners regularly contribute to local forums and groups. For example one of the project workers is a member of one of the working groups, helping to develop local protocols regarding underage sexual activity.

Early intervention service: The team have engaged in a wide range of training including safeguarding, first aid and risk assessment. Recent training provided practitioners with information on working with vulnerable adults and supporting people with mental health issues. The training introduced practitioners to different mental health issues and ways to work with parents and children experiencing problems. Practitioners reported that by receiving regular training they have a current awareness of other agencies' criteria, processes and effective practice. As a result they are better able to advise families on how to navigate through referral criteria or complete relevant forms, which helps foster parental confidence in the relationship.

Organisational qualities

Organisational level

3

Effective supervision

An opportunity for practitioners to openly reflect on issues, emotions and achievements to enable effective practice

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Why is effective supervision important in the development of effective relationships?

Research (Broadhurst et al, 2010) suggests that practitioners can often experience feelings of helplessness because of a reluctance to admit their fears to colleagues and managers and to ask for appropriate help, which can hinder effective safeguarding work. They therefore recommend that systems need to be put in place that support safe working practice and encourage open and honest sharing of fears. Supervision is the primary mechanism for ensuring effective oversight and review of practice and should provide practitioners with a forum to share their anxieties. Davis and Meltzer (2007) highlight the importance of ongoing and regular contact with someone who is adequately trained and is competent in providing facilitative management and supervision. Individuals should be provided with a forum in which they can consider their performance in relation to their service role and their own needs personally and professionally in order to be effective. A literature review by Williams and Churchill (2006) reinforces this view, reporting that the erosion of interpersonal barriers entails a closer and more reciprocal relationship, creating challenges and demands on practitioners that need to be supported by mentoring and supervision (Aldridge 1994; Smith & Gray 2001). Managers provided supervision and informal debriefing sessions after visits to ensure that families did not transfer their problems onto workers. This supervision was particularly important, as there was such a close match between families and workers in terms of ethnicity, gender and parenthood, which might otherwise lead to over-identification (Kelly et al, 2000; Taggart et al, 2000).



Services should:

- ▶ be an open and honest opportunity
- ▶ allow sufficient time for reflection on achievements and challenges
- ▶ maintain a focus on facilitating outcomes for children, young people and families
- ▶ allow managers to challenge practitioners and test practice to improve outcomes
- ▶ be delivered by managers who have supervisory training and appropriate skills and experience



How is Action for Children achieving this?

Intensive family support service: Supervision is critical to the work undertaken by the service due to the varied nature of the families involved and the work they deliver (safeguarding, female offenders, anti-social behaviour). Practitioners have a minimum of monthly supervision and both practitioners and managers agreed that this is necessary and extremely useful. Supervision sessions are relatively prescribed and follow a set pro-forma. Monthly supervision provides the opportunity to review cases in-depth, to provide updates on family's progress and to identify areas for practitioner development. Practitioners also have regular dialogue with managers and support is always available to address immediate issues or concerns. Both formal and informal supervision is highly valued by practitioners and they felt it was a major contributing factor in how practitioners developed their skills to promote effective relationships with parents.

Children's centre: Supervision is undertaken by line managers and takes place on a minimum monthly basis for experienced practitioners and fortnightly for child protection cases and newer practitioners. Practitioners valued supervision commenting, 'It allows you to discuss the positives and the negatives from your cases along with any issues and training needs.' If a family support worker is working with a family where there is a child protection concern, they have a case discussion sheet to complete, with sheets signed by both the family support worker and the manager following discussion.

Early intervention service: Both formal and informal supervision is used within the service's approach to supporting practitioners. Practitioners felt the support provided in monthly supervision and the quick telephone conversations with managers when they are hitting a 'brick wall' are equally important in helping them to develop their practice, and parents' confidence in the relationship.



Other useful information

- Supervising family and parenting workers: a short guide, Honor Rhodes, Family & Parenting Institute, 2008 <http://www.familyandparenting.org/Resources/FPI/Documents/SupervisingFamilyandParentingWorkers.pdf>
- Family Parenting Institute Briefing Sheet: Supervisor Effectiveness Rating Scale (SERS) 2007, Davis H and Meltzer L, Working with parents in partnership, London Crown – available at www.earlysupport.org.uk/training
- Broadhurst K, White S, Fish S, Munro E, Fletcher K and Lincoln (2010), H, Ten pitfalls and how to avoid them, NSPCC
- Williams F and Churchill H (2006), Empowering Parents in Sure Start Local Programmes, Sure Start Report 8, London, DfES

Organisational qualities

Organisational level

4

Welcoming environment

Create an environment that immediately puts parents at ease and is appropriate for the services delivered



Why is a welcoming environment important in the development of effective relationships?

For many parents certain locations are not considered safe, friendly or accessible. Inevitably, this affects how comfortable they feel and may affect the development of trust between parents and workers. This can apply particularly where venues are linked to parents' previous negative experiences with services. Many parents lack confidence in certain surroundings or are fearful about accessing support. Using sensitive, respectful and accessible language in written information and discussions is also important to put parents at ease.



Services should:

- ▶ create an ethos of respect for families
- ▶ ensure individuals are immediately put at ease through friendly greetings
- ▶ consider how to engage fathers effectively in support
- ▶ provide facilities that are comfortable and accessible to the client group
- ▶ have an awareness of cultural issues
- ▶ ensure communication is provided in a format and language that all families can understand



How is Action for Children achieving this?

Early intervention service: The service feels that it is key that they are taking into account what parents feel/how they react to an environment. They deliver some services in a church hall, which is a community-based facility. Parents feel comfortable walking into such an environment and have no concerns about whether other people might see them. Whereas a specific building which is known as the centre where people go for parenting support, they may not feel so comfortable about.



Organisational qualities

Delivery level

1

Team development and support

Enabling practitioners to feel part of a team, whose members provide mutual support to improve family outcomes

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Why is team development and support important in the development of effective relationships?

Through mutual respect, practitioners are able to share ideas, issues and work together to identify solutions to help improve relationships with parents and achieve positive outcomes. This is often through informal conversations in the office and through more formal mechanisms like team meetings and development days. Research by Edelman (2004) found that the key ingredients of effective practitioner-parent relationships include building authentic relationships by being direct, honest and supportive, and having consistent, regular meetings for team members. Maintaining close communication, identifying issues to address, and participating in group problem-solving and decision-making were also felt to contribute to the development of effective relationships.



Services should:

- ▶ create an ethos of shared responsibility for family outcomes
- ▶ encourage colleagues to respect, and draw on, the different strengths within the team to support their practice
- ▶ have regular team meetings, which enable practitioners to share challenges and resolve issues



How is Action for Children achieving this?

Intensive family support service: The team use each other's skills and experience to move families forward, share ideas and resolve difficulties or issues. 'You can often get ground down with some of the families we work with. You need your colleagues for that support and fresh eyes, you need input from others.' (Key worker) This approach also helps provide consistent support to parents. For example, one key worker commented that if she was on annual leave, she knew that her colleagues would ensure that any issues that arose with her caseload were addressed, but also that her families would be supported in the same way as she supported them. This was felt to be important in ensuring that families received a consistent approach from all practitioners, thereby helping establish and maintain a positive relationship.

The mix of skills and experience across the team were felt to be particularly helpful in developing team support and ensuring that these attributes could be best used to meet the needs of the families. This was a view reflected by the Action for Children manager who felt that they had developed a culture within the service of shared responsibility focused on sharing ideas and airing frustrations. 'We have a team approach, staff learn from each other and new staff come in and feed off that.' (Manager)

More formal structures such as team meetings and team development days also provided the opportunity for building a sense of shared responsibility and openness within the project team.

Intensive family support service: The service has created a culture that promotes the questioning and challenging of negative approaches to working with complex families. Practitioners are encouraged to challenge parents who have negative perceptions of agencies by questioning families on how they do or do not address issues. This ethos means that practitioners are confident, secure in their roles and develop the skills to build on strengths within families, as well as addressing negative behaviours. Practitioners had both 'top down' support from senior staff in Action for Children and partner agencies and 'bottom up' support from practitioners working 'on the ground' with families. Practitioners felt that this helped to retain their commitment to improving outcomes for children, young people and families.



Other useful information

- ▶ Edelman MS (2004), A Relationship-Based Approach to Early Intervention, Resources and Connections, Vol 3 (2), July–September

Organisational qualities

Delivery level

2

Flexible delivery

Enable families to engage with services as easily as possible and receive the services they need

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Why is flexible delivery important in the development of effective relationships?

Providing a flexible service within the context of resource constraints and risk management can be challenging. However, service delivery that genuinely takes account of the needs of individual parents and families by its nature must have some flexibility. Both the process and outcomes of support will be influenced by family characteristics and context. Braun et al (2006) found that parents have a role in determining the process of 'helping' and therefore the outcomes of support. Important parental characteristics include factors such as their motivation; barriers to engaging in the process; their attitudes and beliefs about services and associated personnel; their expectation of outcomes; socio-economic circumstances and culture. To respond to the different attitudes and experiences of families, services need to be accessible and flexible to these family features.

Munro (2011) identified that the increased level of prescription to social workers has created an imbalance, taking the focus off workers using their professional expertise to best meet the needs of families they are working with. The review recommends that social workers should be given greater opportunities to exercise their professional judgement.



Services should:

- ▶ be delivered in safe and accessible venues, eg coffee shops, places of worship, libraries and other community locations
- ▶ provide different types of intervention dependent on family context and needs
- ▶ offer flexibility over working hours and timescales for support
- ▶ develop thinking about when to act and intervene
- ▶ match practitioners to parents, ie considerations of skills, experience, cultural context etc
- ▶ develop support packages in partnerships with families



How is Action for Children achieving this?

Children's centre: Each family is initially allocated support for six weeks. After six weeks the support is reviewed and can be extended, depending on a family's needs. For example, some parents have been in contact with the centre for over 18 months. Although this was not necessarily on a one-to-one basis, personal contact with a family support worker was maintained through parents' presence at the centre and on centre-based courses.

Early intervention service: Outreach provision is an integral part of the service. The service covers a large, mostly rural geographical area which means that families would experience difficulties accessing a centralised service location. Therefore staff meet with families at locations that are accessible for families and ones they feel comfortable with, including, where appropriate, their homes; local coffee shops if they want a break from the house; libraries and community centres.

Intensive family support service: The delivery model is flexible which means staff can respond quickly to changing situations or emerging issues. Practitioners are able to reduce or increase support as and when families require it, responding to difficult periods in families' lives or challenging situations. Balanced caseloads enable practitioners to deliver effective change because they are able to spend more time with families and visit them more frequently. Families are also supported outside of core office hours to allow staff to provide support for families for example in developing morning or evening routines. This also helps address potential barriers to engagement such as childcare and fixed appointment times. Overall, staff feel that this approach engenders trust and enables a more open and honest relationship with parents.

Intensive family support service: The service has a strong focus on providing a flexible response to meet the needs of families. The service has strong links with other agencies across social work, housing, education and health that they can access to provide additional support for families.



Other useful information

- ▶ Braun D, Davis H, Mansfield P (2006), How Helping Works: Towards a shared model of process, Parentline Plus

Organisational qualities

Delivery level

3

Facilitating multi-agency services

Building organisational relationships and processes that enable families to efficiently access appropriate support

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Why is facilitating multi-agency services important in the development of effective relationships?

Research shows that a positive relationship between different services brings greater knowledge and experience to family assessment and results in a more informed package of support. Moran et al (2007) found that multi-agency working leads to increased understanding of other organisations' roles and ways of working, in turn leading to earlier referrals and a less stigmatising experience for families, which results in better outcomes for children and families. In particular, personal contact with members of social services enabled partner agencies to make referrals more speedily and appropriately.

Tarleton et al (2006) found that co-ordinated, multi-professional, multi-agency working was key to maximising the positive impact of different services on the lives of parents with learning difficulties. This type of multi-agency working was felt to be dependent on eight key ingredients – use of a key worker system to support parents; honest and ongoing communication; understanding of individual professional roles and their boundaries; clarity and agreement on what constituted good enough parenting for individual families; shared goals and attitudes developed through joint training; development of joint protocols, policies and pathways for supporting parents; training in understanding parents with learning difficulties for workers whose experience was in protecting children; and, training and support in child protection procedures for workers whose experience was in supporting adults with learning difficulties.



Services should:

- ▶ proactively seek collaborative opportunities to complement existing practice and support
- ▶ encourage staff to develop links with other services
- ▶ have clear protocols for information-sharing and referral procedures
- ▶ manage and coordinate the involvement of other agencies by:
 - making sure families are not over-whelmed by the quantity of agencies involved
 - clarifying roles and responsibilities across agencies
- ▶ have clear roles and responsibilities for practitioners when liaising with other agencies



How is Action for Children achieving this?

Early intervention service: New links with other services are created when family support workers are engaged in supporting a family where specific needs are expressed and therefore new links need to be developed to meet these needs. When contact is initially established with new agencies, a representative is invited to attend the internal Action for Children team meeting where they explain their role to practitioners, the services they provide for families, whilst also learning about the services and practitioners available at the Children's centre.

Early intervention service: Links with partner agencies have been established in a number of ways. For example, when cases are allocated, practitioners contact the referral agency to let them know how they will be offering services to the family and to discuss presenting issues for members of the family. The project manager is also an associate member of three Area Behaviour Support Teams. These teams address the educational and behavioural needs of children and young people within the area. Attendance at these meetings has helped establish important links with education services including behaviour support, educational psychology, special educational needs and tuition services. At the beginning of the engagement process the service clarifies the roles of all agencies involved. This aids the assessment process and helps ensure that there is no duplication of work undertaken. Subject to parental consent, the service contacts other agencies, including schools, after the 'contract' meeting. Regular contact is maintained by face-to-face updates, telephone conversations, attendance at core group meetings, child protection case conferences as well as reviews and closure reports that summarise work completed and outcomes met. Partnership working is also seen as an effective means of monitoring progress through information sharing and gathering, particularly at the review stages. Open lines of communication are felt to help ensure 'joined up' thinking, clear goal setting and improved outcomes for children.

Early intervention service: An Action for Children practitioner worked with a parent to help improve her poor relationships with her child's school. The parent had a very negative view of the school and the practitioner played a key role in working with the principal and other support staff at the school to re-establish this relationship. She liaised closely with school staff and the parent to improve the quality of correspondence between both parties and to arrange more regular meetings and school reports. The parent's faith is now restored in her child's school and the child's attendance at school has improved significantly.

Other useful information

- ▶ Moran P, Jacobs C, Bunn A and Bifulco A (2007), Interagency working in an early intervention social services team, *Child and Family Social Work*, Vol 12: 143–51
- ▶ Tarleton B, Ward L and Howard J (2006), Finding the right support: A review of issues and positive practice in supporting parents with learning difficulties and their children, Baring Foundation <http://www.baringfoundation.org.uk/Findingrightsupport.pdf>

Organisational qualities

Delivery level

4

Consistency in approach to working with parents

Ensure that parents feel respected and have confidence in the relationship



Why is consistency in approach to working with parents important in the development of effective relationships?

Consistency in approach, in terms of both relationship continuity and consistent messages from staff, are important in creating an open and honest parent-practitioner relationship. Frequent changes to staff allocated to work with the families can cause delays in the provision of appropriate support, families having to constantly repeat the same information to different practitioners and becoming confused and overwhelmed by having to deal with multiple workers at one time. Where organisations can offer continuity by providing a key worker to support the family and develop a relationship, this has significant benefits for the parental relationship (if the worker is well matched to the family), including greater honesty and greater commitment to action. Consistent messages from staff to parents demonstrate that staff know what they are talking about, which instils parental confidence in their relationship with staff. 'If you ask one member of staff something and then you ask another you'll always get the same response. It's like they've all had the same training and they're all singing from the same hymn sheet' (Parent)



Services and practitioners should:

- action the things that they said they would
- interact consistently, responding to individuals in same way
- offer continuity of support through consistency of the family key worker



How is Action for Children achieving this?

Early intervention service: A practitioner observed that every family the service work with is different and therefore it takes time to get to know the family and how they function.

This family had a history of working with statutory agencies and there had been issues with practitioner turnover (i.e. they had worked with multiple practitioners within the same agency). This meant that they were repeatedly asked to outline the issues they faced, which the mother in the family found particularly distressing.

The practitioner was able to offer the family the reassurance that s/he would be the only worker from Action for Children who would be involved with the family. This assurance helped allay the family's fears and meant they were more receptive to working with the service and achieving outcomes.

Organisational qualities

Family level

1

Supporting service accountability

Ensure that the family is receiving the agreed package of support

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Why is it important to support service accountability in the development of effective relationships?

Families can experience delays and other challenges in accessing agreed support, and parents may find it difficult to resolve issues themselves because of procedural, emotional and practical barriers. These situations can be perceived as 'broken promises' causing a breakdown in trust and confidence between parents and any organisations involved, even if service delivery is not their responsibility. Organisations that monitor and advocate on behalf of parents can build trust and confidence and may have greater credibility to mediate between parents and organisations to overcome any issues.



Services should:

- ▶ have processes to enable practitioners to record responsibilities and timescales for action by partner agencies
- ▶ ensure practitioners are supported to be directive and challenging (where appropriate)
- ▶ develop working relationships at a manager level to enable quick resolution of issues
- ▶ ensure structures for regular multi-agency case reviews are embedded into organisational expectations
- ▶ be embedded in local networks to build reputation and respect, which are facilitators of influence



How is Action for Children achieving this?

Action for Children practitioners across case study areas reported 'fighting their corner' in order to progress action for children and families by partner agencies.

Intensive family support service: All families have detailed support plans which are tailored to meet the needs of family members. These include contributions from other agencies. Project staff play a central role in co-ordinating the support plans, which are reviewed and adjusted on a six weekly basis. The project has been established for over 10 years and is well recognised and respected across the UK. The team felt that this often helped them to encourage accountability:

'Sometimes there is some degree of resistance that we need to overcome, sometimes some negotiation or a lack of urgency. Sometimes we have to go to the children's reporter directly if the other agencies don't follow through.'

Organisational qualities

Family level

2

Strong assessment process

Enable an in-depth understanding of family needs, in order to identify the most effective package of support

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Why is it important to have a strong assessment process in the development of effective relationships?

Assessment drives the process for identifying the type of support a family is offered. If parents do not feel that the assessment process identifies their real needs and priorities then the parents may feel that the worker does not understand their family – this may prevent engagement with the workers and services offered. Research undertaken by the Office for the Commissioner (2010) found that there was a need for holistic assessment and support at a family level as many family members felt that services should have a ‘family focus’. This meant understanding the problems of all family members and having access to both adults’ and children’s services. Families were clear that issues such as domestic abuse, mental ill health, disability and alcohol and drug problems had an impact on all their lives, and the lives of their children. York Consulting (2010) found that the use of a family assessment tool improved family outcomes by recognising and addressing the inter-related nature of family issues.

Broadhurst et al (2010) found that assessment can be too focused on the content of referral, without considering the case history. It suggests that case chronologies or cumulative summary sheets are accessible at the front of electronic files, to aid case analysis and to encourage practitioners to contextualise the presenting issues in a broader child and family history. During initial assessment, they also found that it is critical that where there are a number of agencies involved with a child, each agency clearly understands their role and level of involvement to prevent parental confusion/ repetition.



Services should:

- ▶ use a whole family, holistic family assessment tool
- ▶ use a detailed assessment process to ‘get beneath the surface’
- ▶ develop processes and resource allocation that enables speedy initial contact
- ▶ involve other agencies in assessment and action planning



How is Action for Children achieving this?

Intensive family support service: Assessment skills were seen as being crucial to the practitioner role and the development of the relationship with parents. The service assesses parents over a six week period. Practitioners felt this process was critical in allowing them to understand families' issues and therefore set appropriate targets and goals, but also to allow sufficient time to allow the practitioners to get to know the parents, which helped build trust and an effective relationship.

Intensive family support service: The team regularly initiate and attend Common Assessment Framework and associated review meetings. They also provided examples of working with multi-agency risk assessment conferences which are part of a co-ordinated community response to address safeguarding concerns.



Other useful information

- ▶ Broadhurst K, White S, Fish S, Munro E, Fletcher K and Lincoln H (2010), Ten pitfalls and how to avoid them, NSPCC
- ▶ Family perspectives on safeguarding and on relationships with children's services (2010), London, Office of the Children's Commissioner
- ▶ Kendall S, Rodger J and Palmer H (2010), Redesigning provision for families with multiple problems – an assessment of the early impact of different local approaches, DCSF <https://www.education.gov.uk/publications/eOrderingDownload/DFE-RR046.pdf>

Organisational qualities

Family level

3

Outcome-focused practice

Culture and organisational practice is focused on outcomes for children and parents

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Why is it important to have outcome-focused practice in the development of effective relationships?

Outcome-focused practice is where the focus remains on the family progressing towards their goals and achieving change. It supports a 'can do' attitude and helps to avoid a culture of 'going through the motions' or distraction which diverts attention away from key goals or issues. It also keeps the focus on the child when providing parent-focused support. Importantly it provides insight into whether the support provided has made a difference, and therefore supports the reviewing and planning of services.



Services should:

- ▶ have an organisational ethos and supervision which equates success with progress towards achieving child and family outcomes
- ▶ clarify data that needs to be collected for monitoring and evaluating outcomes
- ▶ use recognised research tools to measure what you want
- ▶ use information to shape and improve services
- ▶ actively involve families, practitioners and other stakeholders in consultation about service delivery



How is Action for Children achieving this?

Action for Children has developed a bespoke outcomes framework for each of the UK regions based on policy and service priorities. The revised Action for Children framework has 20 outcomes, which are grouped according to the national priorities for England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. The outcomes framework contains the same outcome statements for each country but the domain headings under which they are grouped differ according to the national priorities in each country and in relation to England, we have developed four new unique domains in view of the move away from centrally set priorities by the Government in Westminster.

All Action for Children services are expected to monitor and evaluate the outcomes they achieve for children, young people and families against the key indicators set out in the outcomes framework. Services deploy a results-based accountability methodology and each produces a report card highlighting clear and concise information about the difference that services make for children, young people and families. This allows local Action for Children services to evidence the value of their work and also allows key achievements to be aggregated across services.

Outcomes that are being measured across case studies include:

- ▶ improvement in children and young people's attendance at school
- ▶ children and young people being safe
- ▶ improved emotional wellbeing
- ▶ reduction in offending behaviour
- ▶ child and young person development
- ▶ more stable housing and living conditions
- ▶ improvements in relationship between parents and children
- ▶ attendance and progression at school/early years settings
- ▶ improvements in family stability
- ▶ improved parental/child confidence and self-esteem



Other useful information

- ▶ Knowing what you do works: Measuring your own effectiveness with families, parents and children: a short guide, Honor Rhodes, Family and Parenting Institute, 2009 <http://www.familyandparenting.org/NR/exeres/5954988A-3A67-4A23-B86E-2AB807D5B242>
- ▶ Briefing Sheet: Examples of Effective Measuring Tools, Honor Rhodes, Director of Development and Innovation, Family and Parenting Institute 2009 references a number of tools including the Goodman Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (Robert Goodman) - Undertaken with child/young person, parent(s) and/or teacher <http://www.sdqinfo.com/b1.html> and Family, Friends and Self Form (D. Simpson and A. McBride) - Undertaken with young people - This is one of a suite of assessment tools designed by the authors. Each is available free to download at <http://www.ibr.tcu.edu/pubs/datacoll/Adolescents.html>

Want to know more?

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Action for Children is committed to helping the most vulnerable and neglected children and young people in the UK break through injustice, deprivation and inequality, so they can achieve their full potential.

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