

September 2008



Action for Children briefing

Supporting families – children on the edge of care

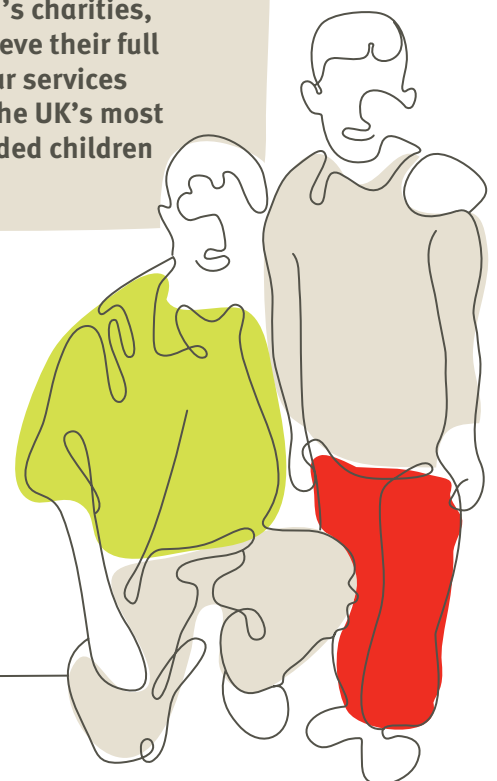
Action for Children is committed to developing and delivering preventative services that allow children and young people to live safely within their own home. Our crisis intervention services, aimed at helping families with children at risk of entering the care system, have been judged a successful way to improve outcomes for children and young people, reducing admissions into care and building on families' strengths and coping techniques.

Action for Children believes that every local authority should have a strong preventative strategy aimed at early identification and responding to the needs of such families.

This briefing paper looks specifically at Action for Children's crisis intervention services for families with children at risk of entering the care system. It describes the importance of having such services available to families in 'crisis' and the benefits that a period of challenging and intensive support can have on both parents and children. It contains a number of case studies and examples outlining methods of working, estimating cost savings and demonstrating an average 80 per cent success rate in preventing entries into the care system.

Action for Children

Action for Children is one of the UK's leading children's charities, helping children achieve their full potential. Through our services we support some of the UK's most vulnerable and excluded children and young people.



Action for Children

We run nearly 450 services and work with nearly 170,000 children, young people and their families across the UK. We are a leading provider of preventative and intensive support to families with vulnerable children, including those in care, in trouble with the law, who are disabled and who have mental health problems.

Action for Children meets the needs of the children and young people who are most in need of support, helping them to achieve their full potential. Through our work and through speaking out, we seek to break the cycle of deprivation. We challenge injustice and empower children and families to overcome the obstacles in their lives that hold them back. We tailor our work to local circumstances, in partnership with local authorities, health providers, communities and local organisations. We design our services around the specific needs of not only the child, but where appropriate the whole family.

Action for Children's work with children who cannot live with their birth families

Action for Children is a provider of services for children on the edge of care or already in care. We run a number of different projects to help these children and young people, such as crisis intervention services for families with children at risk of entering the care system, residential services and foster placements. We are also registered as an adoption agency.

For many years, Action for Children has worked to ensure that care is a positive experience for those children who need it.

We also believe that in many cases timely intervention will prevent making entering the care system necessary. Our services have been developed to provide this vital support.

Children on the edge of care

Across the UK there is an acknowledgement that although outcomes for children and young people in care have improved, they have not kept pace with other children. We also know that children in care are over represented in a range of vulnerable groups, including those not in education, employment post-16, teenage parents, young offenders, drug users and prisoners.

These poor outcomes have prompted policy makers to look at ways to ensure earlier intervention and support is available to

families where children are on the edge of care. As well as needing to improve standards for children in care, local authorities are now being encouraged to find a whole-family solution for children on the edge of care where appropriate. This could mean, for example, the child could live with extended family members or family members could support the child's parents in order to keep the family together. In England, this initiative is supported by the introduction of the Public Law Outline.¹

What are crisis intervention services?

Action for Children crisis intervention services work specifically with the most vulnerable children, young people and families, providing them with urgent and intensive support at a time of crisis. This may be where there is a risk of children coming into the care system as a result of family breakdown or severe difficulties. Crisis intervention can also be used to support children leaving care and returning home to live with their families, or to prevent the breakdown of a foster placement. The service builds on a family's strengths and coping strategies, and incorporates a strong degree of challenge. The crisis intervention model usually involves time-limited but intensive 24-hour/seven-day-a-week availability. On average, families are referred to the service for six to 12 weeks and at the end of the period the family is linked into existing local services.

Crisis intervention involves defusing the immediate and precipitating crisis within the home that leads to the service referral, with support workers engaging the family, children

and/or young people, liaising with other agencies, assessing the problems, developing specific, measurable goals and helping everyone in the family to acquire the skills to achieve them.

Research suggests that crisis intervention models are most successful with families where problems are acute rather than chronic, and that their effectiveness depends to a significant degree on the extent to which they are linked into other local services, to provide children, young people and families with continuing support after the crisis is over. These approaches have been shown to be effective across all ethnic groups.

While this briefing focuses on Action for Children's crisis intervention services for children at risk of admission into care, we also provide services tailored to support children and young people at risk of school exclusion, and intensive family support to families at risk of eviction.

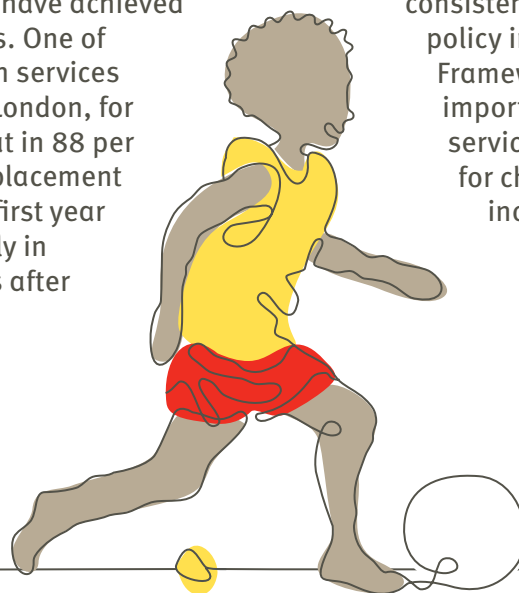
Action for Children crisis intervention services for children at risk of admission into care

Improving outcomes for children, young people and families

Action for Children currently runs crisis intervention services that support families where children are at risk of entering the care system. Our services are delivered in partnership with the local authority, designed and tailored to meet local need. These projects have achieved high levels of success. One of our crisis intervention services that we delivered in London, for example, showed that in 88 per cent of cases a care placement was prevented in its first year of operation. Similarly in Plymouth, the results after

two years found that 94 per cent of young people did not enter the care system.

Action for Children has developed an Outcomes Framework, which applies to our services across all four nations and is consistent with the relevant government policy initiatives. The Outcomes Framework will increasingly play an important role in measuring how our services succeed in improving outcomes for children and young people, including our crisis intervention services.



Action for Children Phoenix (London)

In Merton, Action for Children works with the local authority to prevent children coming into care. When such children are identified, Action for Children intervenes and works to strengthen the family unit and enable them to see the positives in their lives.

The service works with families in crisis using a solution-focused brief therapy model of work. Support is offered for a period of three months, with all interventions regularly reviewed. When the work is completed, families are tracked after six months to see if the progress they made has been maintained and, in some cases, to offer a 'one-off' review session if this is considered useful.

The project consists of a rapid response team, adolescent resource team and family group meetings. The rapid response

team offers crisis intervention by responding within 24 hours and providing intensive intervention with the family during their crisis. The adolescent resource team (ART) offers direct work with children and young people aged 9–19, using different methods to engage young people through play, activity and leisure. Family group conferences are used to ensure that children remain within extended families wherever possible.

Other services include group work for parents with teenagers and for young people. These help young people to gain confidence and raise their self-esteem in order to develop healthier peer relationships.

The Action for Children Phoenix service operates in a multi-agency context, working in partnership with CAMHS, YOT, education, health and other voluntary agencies.

Preventing placement into foster or residential care

Action for Children also run Families First crisis intervention services that offer a solution-focused service as an alternative to the placement of children/young people into either foster or residential care, with the aim of reducing the time children/young people spend in care if placed in an emergency situation. A Families First case worker visits the family within 24 hours of referral and is accessible

to the family 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Within 72 hours of referral, each family member agrees specific goals with their case worker and sessions start to achieve these goals. Once the intensive programme has ended, it is essential that these families have access to continuing 'lighter touch' support as this enables the family to further build on their strengths.

A cost-effective approach

Illustrative comparative costs have consistently shown the potential impact of these services to be financially prudent as well as ethically desirable – the human as well as the exchequer costs of family breakdown.

For example, the annual cost of a mid-range Action for Children crisis intervention service (including running costs) is just over £300,000 per annum. This provides an intensive service to approximately 60 young people and their

families a year, available 24 hours a day over 52 weeks. An average success rate of 80 per cent in keeping the young person at home means that accommodation is avoided for 48 of these 60 young people.

Based on the above costs, there are also potential cost savings. Below are the figures that highlight the average gross weekly expenditure per looked-after child in foster care or in a children's home in England.

Weekly cost of looked-after children in foster care or in a children's home

2005–06

	Average gross weekly expenditure per looked-after child in foster care or in a children's home (CF/B8.1)	Gross total cost for children looked after in foster care and children's homes during the year (CF/B8)
England	716	1,972,814
Shire	709	661,875
Metropolitan	700	566,421
Unitary	683	358,855
Inner London	835	180,890
Outer London	759	204,772

Source: CSCI performance assessment framework report 2005–06

Action for Children Vale of Glamorgan Crisis Intervention Service

In Glamorgan, Action for Children worked in partnership with the local authority and recorded 15 successful interventions over a period of nine months. It is estimated that had these 15 interventions not been undertaken,

the average weekly cost of each placement would have been £815 per week. Given the average placement time is three years, this offers a significant potential cost saving of £127,140 per intervention.

Case study

Action for Children Families First

Source:
'The heart of
the family'
Community Care
12–18 August
2005, pages
34–35

Denise Davies* had reached the end of her tether. Chris, her 14-year-old daughter, had been caught shoplifting and was truanting from school. After Chris went missing for four days, Denise visited her local assessment and advice team and begged for help. She was referred to Action for Children's Families First service and, after an initial interview, began a six-week crisis intervention programme.

'I had lost all the confidence I ever had in parenting,' she says. 'I blamed myself for Chris's behaviour. Tim [the Families First practitioner] was able to re-instate that confidence by working with us as a family and getting a different perspective.'

At the initial Families First meeting, Chris recognised changes were needed as she was not happy with her relationship with her mother either. A mutually agreed contract was drawn up for them to work to, focusing

on topics such as setting boundaries, communication and trust-related issues.

Denise feels the contract played a major part in the progress the family has since made – 'Because there was an independent person at our meetings we were able to talk through issues that had become a problem. I wasn't prepared to leave Chris in the house on her own because I just didn't trust her. Now I have learned, through agreeing to do this for half-hour periods, that I can begin to trust her again.'

'The fact that Tim was always available made a big difference. I knew that if I was facing a particular problem I could speak to him and he would give me really good advice. There were times when I just don't know what I would have done without that support.'

**the names in this case study have been changed*

Conclusions

This briefing paper has described the importance of having preventative services in place to help those families with children who are at risk of entering the care system. While it is necessary to bring children into care where there are safeguarding or other significant concerns, support should also be available to children and their families to avoid them going into the care system. This involves both early identification and responding to problems within the home quickly.

From our work, we know that crisis intervention services can effectively help diffuse family conflict and problems within the home and prevent the need for children to be admitted into care. On average, four out of five referrals to our crisis intervention services are deemed successful, thus preventing admission into care – something that benefits everyone in the family.

For more information about Action for Children's family support services, please contact the Action for Children Public Affairs team on **020 7704 7132** or at publicaffairs@actionforchildren.org.uk

as long as it takes