

Working with Families

This learning summary focusses on the engagement with the victims' families, and the children within the context of 'the family' in two recent case reviews. One was a learning review concerning child sexual exploitation and the other was a combined serious case review / domestic and homicide review concerning Child J, who was murdered by her ex-partner. Both cases resulted in criminal proceedings.

One recommendation from the review was to 'Ensure that the message from victims and their families given to the review are embedded in training'. This summary also draws on Children and Parent Voices from the learning events. Consequently these documents and events form part of that training.

Families have identified the 'Quality of the Professional Relationship' as key to their families' wellbeing during and after their very traumatic experiences. At times this was exemplary, but at other times it fell short of the high standard expected by professionals, families and children.

There is evidence that considerable improvements have been made in more recent practice. The purpose of this summary is to remind and assure yourself that current practice continues to reflect the learning points identified below.

Situational Issues

Neglect
Parental mental health
Substance abuse
Troubled/'difficult'
children
Child sexual exploitation
Unhealthy relationships
Domestic violence
Offending behaviour

Themes in Common with other Oxfordshire Case Reviews

Parents feeling their concerns are not being taken seriously or acted on

Insufficient engagement with wider family including non-resident fathers and older siblings as alternative sources of support and care

Lack of challenge to parents to evidence continuing improvement in their capacity to care for their child

Multiple agencies and changing case workers placing challenge on workers and families to establish relationship of trust

Mental Health services inaccessible to children without diagnosable mental health issue

Key Learning Points for Managers

- Support practitioners to **recognise and manage tension** that exists in helping parents to access support to help them to parent better whilst at same time having to assess, and challenge the parents as to whether they can evidence of real improvement in their capacity to meet the child's needs.
- Encourage practitioners to **keep open minded** about how a child's best interest will be served. Where the prevailing culture is that children's interest is best served keeping them with their family, there is a risk that the culture precludes reconsidering if this approach is still right for each case. Encourage practitioners to revisit assumptions as case progresses.



- There was good evidence of professional concern for parental wellbeing and referring parents to services to support their needs. Ensure that the effect of emotional neglect on the child isn't lost where **too much focus is on attempting to support and maintain the family situation**

Understanding Parental feelings:

'There was insufficient understanding of parental reaction to their children's behaviour and them going missing, so distraught, desperate and terrified parents were sometimes seen as part of the problem'
(Lessons Learnt - child sexual exploitation learning review)

Parental hostility was not always understood as potential result of frustration with inaction or feeling overwhelmed by the challenge posed by their children. 'Consider what it would be like if it was your child' (parent). Recognise that parental response may also be affected by previous experience of services or of worry of potential consequences for them or their child of talking to professionals. Asking for help may make them feel they've failed. They may feel embarrassment, shame, guilt, anger. Don't blame the parents – believe them and work with them.

Key Learning/Action Points for Practitioners

'Good relationship with social worker is essential - tenacity and support of the Social Worker really makes a difference' (parent)

The OSCB is mindful that professionals are faced with the careful balance of gaining trust and confidence whilst maintaining professional curiosity and not taking everything at face value. These learning points are therefore presented with that in mind:

- **Be proactive – perseverance** is needed to gain trust of young people and their parents, share information as much as possible as part of this process.
- **Sharing Information** – be clear and consistent with what will and won't be shared and why. Agree with the child what will be shared with parents. Be prepared for tension between what the child wants parents to know and what parents may feel they have a right to know. Parents appreciate appropriate sharing of information between agencies so they don't have to repeat their story.
- **Provide practical support and advice to parents** who want to be proactively involved. E.g. advice on what they can do re gathering evidence, reporting incidents.
- **Informed decisions** – families and children want to understand the process and implications of giving information to professionals, including what happens when a convicted perpetrator is released. Be open and honest, don't make promises that can't be followed through.
- **Look behind what's going on** - Get to know the child, proactively seek information from close non-resident relatives (fathers, older siblings) to help to illuminate the child's situation. Don't let challenging parental dynamics mask difficulties the child is experiencing.
- **Listen to parents –acknowledge concerns, and give them due weight**, acknowledge them, feedback on what is being done to follow up on evidence/intelligence they have given you. Keep them in the loop - don't only contact when you want something from them
- **Listen to children** – understand how children in controlling and coercive relationships may not be able to say or act in their best interest. Support young people to access Kingfisher or other services for action and support, ensure they don't feel they are being passed around.
- **Ensure families can access support after the event** – to help them to understand what has happened and be able to deal with it in a helpful way.



Key messages for interagency learning

'when school got it right they were invaluable partners – and children, parents and other professionals recognised that' (messages for schools, learning event)

- Experiencing services working together (not 'passing the buck') engenders trust and reduces frustration for families.
- Greater collaboration between health and schools, and schools and social services was identified as needed by parents. Ensure that schools are part of multi-agency working.

If you do one thing, take time to...

Listen to parents and families - review your cases– have you thoroughly considered and paid enough attention to concerns raised by the parents and families? Have you recorded and acted on them? Are you providing them with feedback on what is being done? Are you keeping them in the loop?

Learning Tools and Resources

- For more information – 'Children-and-Parent-Voices-Notes.pdf' and Learning event slides 25th March and 19th March all on www.oscb.org.uk under Themes and Tools/Child Sexual Exploitation
- Access Training from www.oscb.org.uk/training ,
- Parents against Child Sexual Exploitation www.paceuk.info — useful resources for parents and professionals specifically about working with parents
- Horizon – www.oxfordhealth.nhs.uk/children-and-young-people/oxon/camhs-horizon-service supporting young people and families affected by sexual abuse