Best Practice in Access

Fostering Kids National Conference – Making a difference for kids in care

23 September 2016

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Overview

- Current Tensions
  - Different views
  - Impact of trauma on children in care
  - What makes a difference?
- Children’s Views
- Best Practice: Findings from the research
- Implications for Practice in New Zealand
Different Points of View

- Caregivers, birth parents, social workers, lawyers, and judges may have very different points of view.
- Everybody claims to be an expert but power is not evenly distributed.
- Alternatively ‘it’s just common sense’.
- Conflict can become entrenched and when it does.
- The focus becomes the adults rather than the child.
- Despite widespread belief in the importance of contact there has been little research.
- No robust evidence as to whether contact is, or is not, beneficial.
Children in care have experienced significant trauma and disruption in their lives.

Children come into care because their parents cannot keep them safe and in most cases have been the source of their trauma and/or neglect.

Decision-making is emotionally charged and can be highly subjective.
The Impact of Trauma

- The impact of trauma can be life-long
  - Brain development
  - Attachment
  - Sense of self
- But negative outcomes are not inevitable
- Frequent reference is, however, made to children’s resilience without people having a good understanding of what is needed for children to be resilient in the face of adversity
Resilience

- Resilience is not an isolated individual characteristic
- Develops in the face of adversity
  - Positive stress promotes development as children gain mastery over challenges
  - Tolerable stress – beyond child’s capacity to manage but can do so with adult support
  - Toxic stress – strong and prolonged activation of body’s stress management system in the absence of parental support, damages the architecture of the brain, long-term impact
- Key to resilience is the balance between risk factors (stressors) and protective factors
- The more risk factors a child is exposed to, the more protective factors are needed to ensure resilience
Protective Factors

- Individual Attributes
  - Competence
  - Self-esteem
  - Autonomy
  - Responsive parenting
  - Consistency
  - Guidance
  - Belonging
  - Mentoring/role modeling
  - Achievement

- Family support:

- Community support: person or agency

- Cultural connection:
  - Belonging
  - Identity
What makes a difference?

- Consistency and stability
- Opportunities to rework internal working models of attachment through positive relationship experiences
- Providing a secure base to facilitate positive development
- Networks of support based on a stable place of belonging
- Positive cultural identity and sense of belonging
Birth family remain significant for children over time
- Irrespective of how they have been treated
- Even when they are securely attached in another family
- Does not diminish over time

What children want by way of contact varies considerably and children in the same family may have different views

Contact is a major source of conflict between children and their social workers

Children and young people in care want to be consulted about contact and have their views taken seriously
In 2010 the Office of the Children’s Commissioner produced a report on the quality of services for children in care.

- 47 children and young people were interviewed.
- 29 males, 18 females.
- Pākehā 40%, Māori 48%.
- Length of time in care ranged from less than six months to sixteen years.
- Living arrangements included kin and non-kin foster placement, home, cottage environment, boarding school, Family Home, and residential care.
Of the children having contact:
- 18 were happy with the arrangements
- 13 were not
- 1 was unsure
- 2 said they didn’t care

Of the children having minimal or no contact:
- 10 were happy
- 3 were not
What was important?

- Contact with social workers
- Contact with birth family and consultation about this
- Being informed
- Being listened to
- Involvement in planning and decision-making
- Stability
Issues

- There was little evidence of children and young people having been consulted even among those children who were happy with the amount of contact.
- Children and young people in residential facilities accepted that geographic distance was a barrier to contact and valued phone contact with family.
- Children with parents in prison found this difficult because the visiting environment is not child-friendly and they often had to travel considerable distance for a short visit.
Contact: What the research tells us

- Children who cannot live with their birth parents have to manage dual identities and conflicting loyalties
  - They worry about their parents
  - They need to know their history
  - They need to come to a realistic appreciation of birth parents
  - They want to emotionally belong to both families
- Sibling contact is important
- Contact can assist but also carries significant risks
Different patterns of belonging:
- Exclusive with the foster family
- Both foster family and birth family
- Mainly birth family and partly foster family
- Mainly foster family and partly birth family
- Exclusive with birth family
- Transient, absence of belonging

(Goodyear, 2011)

Children’s views about contact will be different for each group
Challenges

- Contact involves difficult transitions that may arouse painful memories and can have a positive or negative effect on children and young people's sense of belonging.
- Loyalty conflicts undermine children’s security and can deny them the secure base essential for their development.
- Contact works best when there are positive relationships between all of the significant adults in the child’s life.
  - At the very least the child needs to have permission to love all of these people.
Risks

- Children can be retraumatised during contact
  - Very young children rely on the physical proximity of their primary caregiver to manage threatening situations
  - The physical presence of an abusing parent can be threatening even though they are behaving appropriately
  - The presence of a supervisor that the child does not know will not reduce the anxiety of very young children

- Location of contact is important
  - Children should not be exposed to conflict in their primary living environment
  - Environment needs to be conducive to positive child-focused interaction
Best Practice

- Decision making must be child centred
- Good decisions take account of:
  - The quality of the relationships and previous history
  - The age and developmental stage of the child
  - The purpose and planned duration of the placement
  - The child/young person’s view
  - Cultural factors
- Flexibility is needed:
  - Rigid arrangements can interfere with children’s capacity to participate in other activities
  - Children’s wishes will change over time
Implications for Practice

- Social Workers, lawyers, judges, birth families and caregivers need information about the impact of contact on children to ensure that decision-making is individualised and child-centred.
- Decision-making needs to be informed by sound knowledge of infant and child development, attachment, resilience and the impact of trauma.
- More focus is needed on children’s views and when they are too young to share these, their perspective should be taken into account through the use of specialist assessments.
Very young children are unlikely to have experienced secure attachment prior to coming into care and most will have very insecure or disorganised attachment.

They are easily overwhelmed in stressful situations and contact is likely to be stressful because:

- They are in the company of an adult who at best has been inconsistent in their provision of care and at worst has been the source of trauma.
- They are separated from the person with whom they are likely to be developing a more positive relationship.
Return Home

- High levels of contact are appropriate to facilitate return home.
- If the goal is return home then contact has to provide an opportunity to build secure attachment and assist the (birth parent(s)) to become attuned and responsive to their child.
- Six months is a long time in an infant’s life and if positive change is not evident then the goal must be reviewed.
- Parents need clear information about time frames for making change.
- For this goal to be realistic intensive intervention is needed.
- A residential programme may be more appropriate to facilitate change.
Avoiding Drift

- The option of return home cannot be held out indefinitely for young children
- Continued instability is detrimental and the impact is long-term
- Small children cannot live in an emotional vacuum and need caregivers who are willing to attach to them
- Careful thought needs to go into contingency planning so that suitable long-term placement is available if the goal of return home is not achieved
Home for Life

- When a child is transitioning to a long-term or permanent placement it is important that the establishment of new relationships is the primary focus.
- This does not mean that all contact has to stop but it does mean that birth parents have to allow their child to invest in these new relationships.
- Contact has to be closely monitored to ensure that frequency and duration do not undermine the child’s developing security.
Over the age of two years, increasing cognitive capacity allows for more preparation and increasing tolerance for stress.

Previous exposure to trauma, however, creates a significant risk that these developing capacities will be overwhelmed.

Older children have more resources to draw on but their capacity depends on the balance of risk and protective factors in their lives.

The risk of loyalty conflicts is high, especially when children have come into care at older ages.
Many older children in care have experienced considerable disruption and may continue to long for return home. In many cases this wish is granted in teenage years when the possibility of a stable placement diminishes. Sometimes this pattern is used as a rationale for maintaining contact or seeking out parents who have lost contact. This is not good practice!
What needs to change?

- Families and caregivers need support to work through the issues associated with contact
  - Birth families need to grieve for the loss of their child
  - Birth parents may need to be challenged about their behaviour and helped to understand their child’s perspective
  - Assumptions are often made that kin will sort these issues out themselves without recognition that prior relationships may make this even more difficult
- All parties need to be heard (including the child)
- Caregivers may need on-going support to ensure that contact is a positive experience for children
There is a place for family support services specialising in work with the wide range of families caring for children not born to them.

These services are more likely to be effective because CYF social workers are always associated with the negative impact of statutory intervention.

CYF will not have an on-going relationship with families who provide a home for life.
Conclusion

- Nothing is more important than relationships because they are the source of the protective factors that promote resilience in the face of adversity.
- Decision-making about contact has to be child-centred and have the goal of supporting the child in managing the challenging task of negotiating the dual identity that comes with separation from birth parents and being raised in another family.
- Careful attention to the individual circumstances of each child is critical for good decision-making.
- There are no one-size-fits all solutions or rules of thumb!