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Senior
Managers'
Briefing



PSDP - Resources and Tools: Understanding the lived experience of children and families


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This short briefing is written for senior managers and strategic leads and provides summary information about:

- > the importance of consulting with children, young people and families at all levels of service delivery and planning in children's social care organisations
- > the impact of poverty and social inequality on the lived experience of children, young people and families
- > The need to ensure culturally capable practice that takes account of the intersectional nature of diversity, identity and inequality.

1. Listening to and hearing the voices and views of children and families in social work practice

Senior leaders play a key role in ensuring that the organisational culture in children's social care encourages social workers to work collaboratively with children and families so that their voices, views and experiences are a central focus of service delivery. Similarly, children and families should be consulted about the organisation's practice framework and its vision for practice development.

Seeking regular and meaningful feedback should be a foundational element of ethical social work practice with children and families. When families feel heard and their experiences are understood, they are more able to accept challenges, work towards positive change and enact their own solutions (Forrester et al, 2012).

In order to engage families in this way, social workers need to be provided with high-quality supervision and support by practice supervisors. They are then more able to accept challenges and practice sensitively and ethically, identifying risks and building on strengths when working with families.

'Workers' state of mind and the quality of attention they can give to children is directly related to the quality of support, care and attention they themselves receive from supervision, managers and peers.' (Ferguson, 2011, p152)

Practice supervisors play a key role here in ensuring that there is regular discussion within supervision that seeks to learn more about the voices, views and experiences of family members and their experience of working with social workers.

They also play a crucial role in highlighting the importance of working collaboratively with children and families and regularly seeking feedback from them. It is also important that organisations seek to obtain the views of children and young people currently on the edge of care, and those of their parents or caregivers. A significant number of children and families will fit this criteria and it would not be representative if their voice was not heard.

2. Developing a range of consultative representative forums for children and families within the organisation

Organisations needs to celebrate and promote the voices of parents and children and meaningful involvement should be embedded at all levels. For example:

- > learning and development – identifying local themes and practice issues for the organisation to be aware of and supporting parents to speak at teaching or training events and CPD
- > recruitment processes – helping the organisation recruit and interview new staff and take part in ASYE assessments
- > service improvement and review – helping the organisation shape and build service delivery as a whole and introduce new ideas and thinking.

This is achieved in many local authorities and trusts by setting up and supporting formal parent and child representative groups. For example, the children in care council, youth cabinet and young people's / parent / carer reference groups. There has been growing interest in ensuring that organisations consult with and support parents who have been successfully reunited with their children after care proceedings, and also parents who have had children adopted.

Given that these families have experienced safeguarding involvement, it is essential that the organisation builds relationships with them in order to encourage them to give feedback about the experience of working with social workers, what worked well and what could be improved.

3. Understanding the impact of poverty and social inequality on the lived experience of children and families

Over the course of the last 12 years, austerity measures have had a significant impact on the most vulnerable members of local communities, with increasing social inequality being reported (Guardian online, 2018). Poverty, inequality and financial insecurity have a direct impact on parents' capacity to provide stable housing and meet the physical and educational needs of their children (Bilson et al, 2017). In addition, it is likely that the stress and strain of economic hardship affects parents' emotional state and this in turn can have an impact on the care of their children.

These issues have always been present but have arguably become magnified in recent years. However, social work practice has not necessarily kept up to date with the new socioeconomic landscape. The traditional arena of working on the quality of emotional care, relationships and attachments needs to expand to respond to the immediate basic needs for suitable housing and a regular income. To help practice supervisors support social workers to practice effectively and humanely in this context, senior managers need to ensure that:

- > practitioners have a good understanding of the local issues regarding housing, benefits and how these impact on individual, family and community functioning
- > there are effective links between children's social care and local partners who hold specialist knowledge in relation to housing, benefits, debt reduction etc., so that practitioners and supervisors can maintain up-to-date knowledge, know how to access resources and support, and can share this information with families
- > the evidence gathered from practice regarding poverty and inequality is effectively communicated to senior leaders, to inform local strategic planning
- > they role-model humane 'poverty-aware' practice in the ways that services function
- > practitioners and supervisors are supported to develop critical thinking skills, for example, being able to recognise that poverty correlates with but does not cause child abuse and neglect
- > they provide readily available access to research in this area, such as Research in Practice, Community Care Inform and other online resources.

For social workers to take seriously the impact of poverty, diversity and equity issues, they need to see a response at a strategic level. If all the focus is on individual practitioners' efforts, they are at risk of feeling powerless and disengaged.

4. The need to ensure social work practice takes account of the intersectional nature of diversity, identity and inequality.

In seeking to learn more about the lived experience of children and families, it is important to ensure that practitioners are able to work competently and understand the intersectional nature of culture, religion, ethnicity, sexuality, gender identity, and disability. The term 'intersectionality' refers to the: 'complex, cumulative way in which the effects of multiple forms of discrimination (such as racism, sexism, and classism) combine, overlap, or intersect especially in the experiences of marginalized individuals or groups' (Merriam-Webster online).

Many organisations have workforces that are very skilled in working with issues of diversity and equality. However, research studies highlight concerns that decisions in practice are often influenced by:

'time and workload pressures; risk averse practice cultures; formulaic assessment processes; the reduction in family support services; and traditional expectations of 'family', particularly those related to cultural and gendered norms.'

(Mason and Walsh, 2018)

Practice supervisors play a key role in ensuring that diversity is routinely explored in supervision and any decision-making processes. It is important that senior leaders set out:

- > clear expectations about social work practice responding to diversity and working with identity
- > support practice supervisors to build confidence in supervising staff on this issue
- > monitor children and families' experiences to ensure that their contact with social workers is not discriminatory.

To support practice supervisors to ensure social workers can operate ethically in relation to intersectionality, senior managers need to ensure that:

- > their own understanding of equality, inclusion and diversity (particularly as they apply to race, religion, nationality, ethnicity, gender identity, and sexuality) is kept up to date
- > they set a clear expectation that others across the service and organisation are able to do the same
- > there is a statement about equality, inclusion and diversity in the vision / mission and values statement

- > conversations regarding such matters are built into leadership team meetings so that this thinking becomes 'part of what we do' and isn't marginalised
- > they model this openness and respect in the support provided to their employees and the way families are discussed
- > they make concerted efforts to recruit and retain a diverse workforce, address any barriers to career progression, and include understanding of cultural capability as a part of the recruitment process (e.g. a statement in the application form, interview questions etc.)
- > they invest in professional development in relation to equality, inclusion and diversity – a rolling offer of easily-accessible training and learning resources should be provided
- > supervision, training, policy and procedures make explicit that practitioners are not expected to be experts in all areas, but they must approach people who are culturally different with openness, respect, and a willingness to learn
- > audits of practice, training, development and supervision set an expectation that practice must respond to diverse needs, and that this is clearly articulated in assessments, plans and interventions
- > they establish a performance management system that includes an appropriate recording of equality protected characteristics in practice management systems
- > practice supervisors have the skills and confidence to consistently monitor equality data against protected characteristics / equality groups to ensure there is no discrimination in service delivery or outcomes for children and families.

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