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Inquiry Report Summary:

The Significance of Quality Contact between Children and Young People in Care and their Case Workers

August 2009

The quality of the relationship between a child and their case worker can make or break the important but fragile links between a child and the 'state' in its guardianship role. The relationship can make it easier or harder for a child to get what they need for safety and wellbeing. This inquiry was held to look more closely at what children think about contact and relationship with their case worker.

The full report, *The Significance of Quality Contact between Children and Young People in Care and their Case Workers* is available on the Guardian's website on www.gcyp.sa.gov.au

The Office of the Guardian for Children and Young People promotes and protects the rights of children and young people under the guardianship, or in the custody of, the South Australian Minister for Families and Communities.

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The Office of the Guardian for Children and Young People commenced its inquiry into the significance of quality contact between children and young people in care and their case workers in November 2008.

It is evident from the findings of the inquiry that children and young people in state care value a positive relationship with their case worker for a sense of safety and happiness, assistance to resolve issues, access to goods and services and empowerment in decisions. Case workers do not provide these things alone but children perceive them as powerful in making them happen.

The benefits of quality contact and a good relationship are, among other things, contributing to the wellbeing of a child, fulfilling statutory responsibilities of legal guardianship and duty of care, a child's participation in decisions that affect them and demonstrating safe and meaningful relationships.

There are many challenges for workers in making and maintaining a good relationship, such as other demands on their time, working within professional boundaries appropriate for children, balancing the sometime conflicting views of children and their families, maintaining respectful relationships with carers through testing times, and the substantial requirements of an accountable public service.

The combined evidence from the inquiry provides a fuller picture of what is quality contact with case workers but the interviews with children suggest that the relationships are typically positive and beneficial. This is good news for us all and especially for case workers who are in the job because they want to make a difference to children's lives.

From the literature

The inquiry commenced with a review of the literature which identified the following as important to children in their relationships with case workers:

- Accessibility - can the child or young person contact the case worker easily?
- Reliability - can the child or young person count on the case worker?
- Sufficient frequency of contact - does the child or young person know their case worker?
- Regularity - how frequently does the child or young person have contact with their case worker?
- Continuity - how many case workers has the child or young person had and how long has the current case worker been allocated?
- Privacy - does the child or young person have the opportunity to speak independently to their case worker?
- Informality - does the child or young person engage in any activities with their case worker?
- Child-centred - does the child or young person have a say in how often and when they have contact with their case worker?
- Personal qualities of case worker - does the child feel that the case worker listens to her or his views and treats her or him with respect?

Subsequent to the literature review we sought the views of 28 children and young people and convened a focus group of case workers for their views. With the cooperation of Families SA we took evidence from the case files of 96 randomly selected children and young people. To further assist us, we engaged two young researchers, one currently in care and one who had been, and facilitators for the interviews and focus groups.

The findings and some questions for further consideration are summarised here.

Frequency of contact

This is a bonding time for me to get to know her

Frequent contact between a child and case worker is desirable but the case file evidence tells us that only one in five children have the required monthly face to face contact. The interviews with children suggest a wide range of practice among case workers in relation to frequent contact.

Why is there such a gap between requirement and practice?

How could frequent contact be monitored and improved?

What other approaches to contact could be used?

How can we ensure that children have a say about the frequency?

It is unlikely in the foreseeable future that there will be the number of case workers to meet standards and children's requests for contact. This makes it more important that frequency of contact is decided following assessment of need and risk, taking into account the child's views. This is a preferred option to not allocating a case worker to a child, when rationing resources.

Is there a tool to assist with assessment of need and risk to determine an appropriate frequency of contact?¹

If there is a tool, how can it be applied consistently?

Before I would be able to walk for five minutes to see my worker and after the [boundary] realignment it would take me three buses and about an hour and a half to see my new worker. I wish this didn't happen.

Several children talked in interview about the problems caused by distance and long travel times and the impediment this was to frequent contact.

This is likely to continue to be a problem where children are placed at some distance from the office. It points to the need to negotiate with children about their wishes and views on contact with their case worker and consider a more flexible approach to cross-boundary service for children.

Continuity of case worker

There might have been a time when I didn't have a worker. There was definitely a time when no one contacted me for a bit. I felt lonely.

Most children are allocated a case worker most of the time. Only half of the children have the same case worker over a year and the case file evidence also suggests that one in five children do not have enough contact, if any, to know their case worker.

Continuity of case worker is imperative because good relationships are built over time. In most cases one worker over a child's time in care is not possible but nor should change of case worker be thought of as merely a change in job duties. Taking on the job of case worker to children should be treated and supported as a long-term commitment.

Can recruitment and retention strategies be adapted to emphasise the personal and long-term commitment expected?

What impact do short-term employment contracts have on retention?

Would succession and progression planning by managers improve the rate of continuity?

Are job satisfaction surveys detailed enough to address issues promptly?

What further can be done to attract suitable recruits?

Accessibility

My worker is difficult to contact.

Children want their case worker to be accessible and reliable. This is not always possible, allowing for absences from work and attending to more urgent matters.

Are there explicit expectations of case workers about their responsiveness to children's requests? Are these adequately monitored?

Case workers reported in the focus group that there are barriers to being accessible such as 'lack of resources, cars, volunteers, there are forms for everything and a huge amount of paperwork required.' It is not clear from the evidence in this inquiry whether an analysis of work tasks and role has been undertaken so it is not possible to conclude that case workers are doing tasks that should be done by others.

Would analysis of job priorities in the case work role help to address issues of inaccessibility?

Quality of contact

[I like it] when she explains things really well and treats me like a normal person and not some foster kid. I think she genuinely cares when she helps me and my sister with our Story Books.

The children interviewed clearly valued a good relationship with their case worker. They wanted the case worker to spend time just with them and for the case worker to know them. They saw the case worker as important to their safety and in resolving issues.

The split responsibilities for guardianship and care of children in state care is a particularly challenging environment for being child-centred, if only because there are so many adults with strong interests. However it is also the most important circumstances to be child-centred because the stakes for the child are so high.

Do supervisors regularly work with case workers in assessing child responsiveness and focus?

What professional development is available on child-centred practice?

Are there mechanisms for regular feedback from the child about their contact or relationship with their case worker?

Participation in decisions

I had a choice if my sister was to move in with me and also had a choice about who was to look after us when our carer is working.

Half of the children interviewed said that their views had been taken into account on important decisions and the case file evidence tells us that some attempt had been made in 12 months to include two in three children in major decisions. However, judging from the case workers' comments and from our other work on this topic there are perceived and real impediments to full participation of children. It takes time and competes with other demands of the job. Skills in engaging children, and particularly younger children and children with disabilities, vary widely and there appears to be limited opportunity to learn new skills.

What is the evidence of organisational commitment to child and youth participation?²

Does reflection on practice examine values and attitudes to children's participation?

How are examples of good participative practice shared within the organisation?

2. The development of these ideas is found in: Office of the Guardian for Children and Young People (2009) *Guide to Good Practice: Participation of children and young people in decisions made about their care*, available from www.gcyp.sa.gov.au