

Working with children and 'lost' parents

The Children Act 1989 established a new framework - partnership - for relationships between local authorities and the parents of children being looked after by social services departments. This applies to all children, not only those who entered the care system after implementation of the Act. Using action research working with a small sample of cases, this project sought to establish what were the barriers to working partnerships between social workers and parents who currently had no contact with their children in public care, and how these barriers could be overcome.

-  Children in public care who were not in contact with their families generally lacked information about their histories which could help them develop their personal identity. In particular, social services files held very little information about fathers.
-  Even where existing information was limited, it was possible to trace most parents.
-  Although most parents in the study did not remain in contact with their child's social worker when they had no contact with their children, there was evidence of continued concern for their children, particularly from mothers.
-  Lack of knowledge about parents and concern about the impact on children and placements inhibited most social workers from contacting parents. Judgements that mothers had 'failed' their children, combined with a difficulty in conceiving a role for parents where return home was not expected, also meant that little or no work to maintain parental involvement was undertaken.
-  Social services department organisation, particularly non-allocation, reallocation and inaccessibility of social workers, undermined work in partnership with parents.
-  Workload was also an issue: where placements were stable little priority was given to involving parents; where placements were unstable, priority was given to finding new foster carers.
-  Children's feelings towards parents were often ambivalent but they still responded positively to the idea of parents being given information about them. They valued social workers who made efforts to contact parents on their behalf even where these were unsuccessful. Where young people said they wanted information about or contact with lost parents social workers were generally responsive.
-  Renewing links with families was difficult and time-consuming, but children appeared to gain in terms of knowledge and understanding, even if direct contact was not renewed.

The importance of maintaining and promoting contact with parents, community and culture has been increasingly recognised as a crucial aspect of good practice when children and young people are being looked after by a local authority. This was endorsed in the Children Act 1989 and accompanying guidance, with an explicit recognition that local authorities would work actively with parents, even where children may not return to live with them. This applied not only to children and young people brought into the care system since the Act but also to those already there. The study sought to develop social work practice by focusing on the implementation of the principle of partnership where parents had lost contact with their children in the care system.

Contact and partnership

There is a tendency to conflate contact between parents and children with partnership between social workers and parents. The existence of contact is seen as satisfying the obligation to work in partnership, often without further efforts to involve parents in planning and decision-making about their children. Similarly, where contact is not considered to be in a child's best interests, perhaps because of the parent's behaviour or the child's unwillingness to have contact, parents are not even kept informed. Although most parents in the study did not remain in contact with their child's social worker when they had no contact with their children, there was evidence particularly of mothers' continued concern for their children, including in cases where mother and child had been separated at birth.

Children, parents and their circumstances

There were 62 children and young people in the study, 37 were white, 5 were black and 20 were black of mixed parentage. The policies and practices of the care system were crucial to their well-being; half had entered public care before the age of 5 years. They were both older and had spent longer in care than most children in the care system. Twenty-five children had spent more than three-quarters of their life in care. Fifty had entered the system before the implementation of the Children Act 1989. For the majority of the children there were concerns about abuse or neglect but behavioural difficulties contributed to the admission of a quarter. Twenty-two had entered public care without any form of court order, only 8 remained 'accommodated'. Twenty-six (40 per cent) had 2 or fewer placements during their time in care but 19 (30 per cent) had experienced at least 4 placements.

Poverty, poor health and lack of support marked the lives of the 51 mothers - a quarter were victims of domestic violence. Social services files contained far less information about fathers - the researchers had detailed information for only 21 of 54 fathers, a third of whom were known to have been accused of Schedule 1 offences, arising out of sexual or physical abuse. The identity of 7 fathers was not known. The lack of information on social services files about fathers and the focus on mothers suggested that the contributions, positive or negative, which fathers make to their children's well-being were ignored.

Losing parents and families

Before they entered public care, 32 of the 62 children in the study had lost contact with at least one of their parents, most frequently their father; 3 had lost contact with both their parents. *Whilst in care*, 50 of the 62 children lost contact with a parent, 43 lost contact with their mother, 25 with their father and 18 with both parents. Entering the care system also meant separation from siblings; 25 children entered care without all their siblings, 31 had a sibling born after they entered care and 14 lost a sibling through adoption. Children were sad at loss of contact with siblings and often anxious about their care.

Judgements that mothers had failed their children, combined with a difficulty in conceiving a role for parents where return home was not expected, meant that little or no work to maintain parental involvement was undertaken. Where placements were stable, work with children and young people had been given little priority; at times there was no allocated social worker. Where placements were not stable, social work had focused on maintaining or finding new placements. In contrast with parents, foster carers were highly valued and given resources which parents had been denied. Foster carers' objections to contact were determinative; in the absence of social work involvement, foster placements became de facto adoptions with the exclusion of the child's family. Adoption plans (never implemented) were a factor in the ending of family contact for 10 children.

In most cases, contact had ended because of informal barriers, there was considerable evidence of its discouragement and little evidence of positive support for parents - either before or after their children entered public care. Despite lack of contact it was evident that mothers remained concerned and had made attempts to find out from social services how their children were faring.

Although parents were out of touch with social services most could be found via addresses in their

children's files, contact with housing departments, other social services departments or through the electoral roll. Even where the existing information was limited it was possible to trace most parents.

Getting in touch

The initiative to renew contact between social services and parents came from parents and social workers. Lack of knowledge about parents and concern about the impact on children and placements inhibited social workers from contacting parents. Anxiety was increased by feelings that parents had been badly treated in the past or if the child's experience of care had been poor. Where the child's situation was very poor, the view that "there's nothing to lose" could make the risks acceptable; conversely, if the social worker believed that a parent "had nothing to offer the child", all benefits of contacting the parent were discounted. Where young people said they wanted information about or contact with lost parents, social workers were generally responsive.

Loss of contact with parents left children and young people with gaps in knowledge about themselves which their files could not fill. It left them with unanswered questions and affected their sense of personal identity. Their feelings towards parents were often ambivalent, but despite this they responded positively to the issue of parents being given information about them. They valued social workers who made efforts to contact parents on their behalf even where these were unsuccessful.

Parents wanted to know about their children; generalities were not enough. They also needed to feel that they were listened to and that their views were respected. Where children had been removed from home, parents were concerned that their children should have a fair account of the circumstances which had led to this and should understand the efforts that they, the parents, had made. Some parents harboured unrealistic expectations that children would return to live with them, others were worried that renewed social work interest was a prelude to returning a child they felt they could not look after.

Most social workers initially sought to renew contact by letter; positive responses were received to 14 out of 18.

What children gained

Positive developments, attributable to the worker's efforts to find and involve a lost parent or to the lost parent's attempt to contact a child could be established in the majority of cases (see Table 1).

Children and young people gained knowledge about their families and themselves, met family members and even re-established contact with parents or relatives. New relationships were not necessarily strong and secure; separation and the trauma of experiences before and in care had to be overcome. The cases where there was little or no positive development were, for the most part, those where little had been done by the social worker.

Table 1: End of project summary of the results for children of trying to re-establish partnership

Received information/photos/letters	9
Meetings with parents or relatives	10
Regular visits to 'lost' relatives	2
Renewed relationship with 'lost' parents	14
Renewed relationship with 'lost' parents, not maintained	6
Unclear at this point	14
Little or no positive development	7
Total	62

Renewing relationships was difficult. Sensitive preparation and the exchange of photos or videos before first meetings could avoid the pain of non-recognition. Social workers appeared to give less attention to sharing information about the child's experiences, potentially undermining the development of their relationship with the parent and the parents' relationship with their child.

Partnership and the barriers to partnership

All but one of the social workers viewed partnership as an essential way of working. They viewed partnership as a process which involved openness, respect and honesty; it necessitated good communication and an acceptance of the validity of different perspectives and approaches. Working in partnership with parents, particularly those who had been marginalised in the past, required considerable commitment and effort.

Although social workers acknowledged the existence of power differentials between the social services department and families, many continued to view the parents as a major barrier to partnership. Other workers identified barriers such as social workers' attitudes, and the presence of organisational constraints which provided insufficient resources for work with children who were already in care and prioritised work more traditionally regarded as child protection. In particular there was a problem of

working with parents where no social worker had been allocated to children, where there were frequent changes of the children's social workers, or where social workers' workload made it very difficult for parents to get in touch with them.

Conclusion

The researchers conclude that social work to give children in public care a positive personal identity or to involve their parents has been given insufficient priority in the face of the demands of child protection or work to secure permanent placements. Parents too have needs; responses to their experiences, including the impact of discrimination, are essential for partnership.

Family support and social work which valued parents and emphasised working in partnership with them could have helped to ensure that parents did not become lost after their children entered public care. The same principles and commitment enabled partnerships to be created from very adverse beginnings.

About the study

The project was designed and conducted as action research. The researchers recruited social workers who were interested in trying to establish a working partnership with a 'lost' parent and with relevant cases, from 10 local authorities. Training was provided with consultancy on social work, law and tracing to support this work; social workers retained casework responsibility. The progress of cases was followed for 30 months. Information was collected by reading files and interviews with social workers. Towards the end of the study, the views and experiences of a sample of the parents (9) and the young people (9) were recorded by interview (interviewees were not necessarily related).

Further information

The full report, *Working with children and 'lost' parents: putting partnership into practice* by Judith Masson, Christine Harrison and Annie Pavlovic, is published by YPS for the Foundation. It is available from: York Publishing Services Ltd, 64 Hallfield Road, York YO3 7XQ, Tel: 01904 430033, Fax: 01904 430868 (ISBN 1 899987 61 4, price £9.95 plus £1.50 p&p).

Two other reports will be published in 1998 by Ashgate: *Lost and Found* by J Masson et al., a reader on partnership focusing on issues relating to losing and finding parents; and C Harrison et al., *Learning to work in partnership*, a workbook for social workers on developing their skills on working with parents.

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