



Title: Effective Relationships with Vulnerable Parents to Improve Outcomes for Children and Young People: Final Study Report

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SCS topic headings: Personal Safety; Home Safety; Safety of Vulnerable Groups; Partnership Working; Community Engagement

This document is a REVIEW of effective intervention approaches.

Summary of the intervention's aim

York Consulting was commissioned by Action for Children to undertake research to articulate how Action for Children professionals develop effective relationships with vulnerable parents and how this makes a difference for children and young people, given that a wide range of existing research establishes the importance of practitioner/client relationships in achieving positive outcomes. In this context it was important to conduct the case study work in areas where there was clear evidence of positive outcomes. Three aims were to:

- evidence and articulate the value of (i.e. the outcomes arising for children and families from) effective relationships as delivered by Action for Children practitioners
- define the key aspects of these effective professional relationships
- identify the competencies (personal and organisational) required to achieve these effective professional relationships.

Outcomes

The research concluded that robust evidence of a causal link between an effective practitioner-parent relationship and improved outcomes for children and young people is limited. Nevertheless, there is considerable literature which points to the importance of the relationship between practitioners and clients in achieving outcomes. See sub-sections 3.5-3.8 of the report for summary discussions regarding the reviewed literature in this study.

Further outcomes from the research include:

1. A 'Skills Framework' identifying the qualities, experience, skills and knowledge required by practitioners to develop effective professional relationships with vulnerable parents

The report researchers initially developed a draft 'Skills Framework' based on the literature review and advisory group input (see the section [How the evaluation gathered information for findings and conclusions](#) below). The case study work then explored stakeholder views on the features of the draft framework that were important in allowing them to develop good relationships with vulnerable parents. This section of the report identifies challenges and opportunities for practitioners, including:

Challenges in the development of effective relationships with parents may be:

- Meeting organisational requirements
- Effective support for practitioners
- Engagement of other services
- Family context and circumstances.

What works well in Action for Children's approach to working with parents?

- Consistency in approach
- Flexible and non-prescriptive delivery
- Developing a package of support in partnership with families to meet their needs
- A strong focus on autonomous delivery and seeking new and creative solutions to meet needs and improve outcomes
- Equity and equality in delivery
- Having the time to develop relationships with parents which helps create a strong foundation for the practitioner-parent relationship
- Delivering services in flexible locations to suit the needs and circumstances of children, young people and families
- Setting flexible timescales for support, using ongoing review and reflection of the progress and needs of children, young people and families to adapt timescales as necessary.
- Facilitating multi-agency services: regular, ongoing contact between Action for Children and other agencies and professionals is central to the support provided to parents.
- Action for Children practitioners play a central role in effectively co-ordinating support with other agencies, facilitating multi-agency meetings, and adopting a lead professional or key worker role.
- Supporting service accountability.

Practitioners felt that demonstrating credibility and genuineness is a good way to build trust with parents. They reported that being down-to-earth and demonstrating

warmth, are all ways in which to build trust with parents. Other helpful approaches may be structured by:

- having the time to get to know parents- having a comprehensive assessment process
- being reliable and proactive, meeting agreements and taking actions, within set timescales
- keeping parents informed- maintaining ongoing communication and recognising positive achievements.

2. An 'organisational framework' which identifies organisational qualities that support the development of effective relationships between practitioners and vulnerable parents

Facilitating qualities include:

- Providing formal and informal opportunities for practitioner training and development
- Management commitment and ethos: Creating a service culture where practitioners feel supported, trusted and empowered is helpful in establishing strong relationships with parents
- Effective supervision: This is critical in supporting practitioners to improve outcomes for children, young people and families and to develop good relationships with parents.

3. The 'Final Study Report' draws on the researchers' literature review and case study evidence to outline the aspects and competencies required to deliver an effective relationship with vulnerable parents.

The report findings conclude that organisational facilitators help support the development of good relationships between practitioners and parents. These facilitators include:

- creating a welcoming environment
- a management commitment and ethos
- practitioner training and development
- effective supervision.

The following selected paragraphs convey the key points for recommendations of good practice:

A comprehensive assessment process is an important mechanism for allowing practitioners the time to get to know parents and understand the issues facing them and their families. Practitioners are able to use the assessment process to make sure they are providing the right services for the families and that all needs/issues have

been identified. It also allows practitioners to work in partnership with parents to enable them to set their own targets and goals (another mechanism for helping build trust) and for parents to recognise that the service is there to support and work with them to improve outcomes.

The ability for Action for Children services to provide flexible, needs-led delivery is a significant driver in their ability to meet families' needs and improve outcomes for children and young people. This flexibility also greatly assists practitioners to develop successful relationships with parents.

Managers felt that an 'open door' management approach helps create an environment, which is supportive to practitioners having new ideas, and encourages ongoing communication.

Equity and equality in service delivery is also important in ensuring that practitioners are aware of issues that may affect parental engagement in support and can adopt a flexible delivery approach to address this. Practitioner's ability to respond appropriately to cultural issues in order to provide accessible support is crucial. This may involve appropriately matching practitioners to parents.

Practitioners using an action-focused approach were felt to be fundamental to developing good relationships with parents. Practitioners felt that being 'action-focused' ensures that their practice is fully focused on supporting families to address needs and improve outcomes. Utilising a solution-focused approach helps build parental independence. Practitioners adapt families' support plans as needs are met or issues arise throughout the life of the support by means of ongoing review and reflection.

Action for Children services use modelling behaviour as a mechanism for building parents skills and independence. Practitioners reported that parents often need support in understanding how to interact with their children or in relation to positive parenting skills.

Being reliable and proactive also helps build trust and respect between practitioners and parents.

Keeping parents informed is a strategy used by Action for Children practitioners to build trust and mutual respect.

Practitioners felt that recognising positive achievements is important in maintaining a good relationship with parents.

Providing practical support to parents helped to build parental independence. It is also a way of resolving issues that families are facing that may be detracting from their ability to be in a position to address more significant issues they are facing.

Practitioners recognised that service dependency is not conducive to securing long-term outcomes for families. Across all case study areas, there was a strong focus on providing parents with the strategies to 'move on' and practitioners working with parents to develop the skills in order to achieve this.

Practitioners also often have a role in presenting difficult information to parents in a way that they are able to understand; in a sensitive and appropriate way.

Summary of evaluation conclusions

Keeping a clear focus on intended outcomes for children and young people is central to delivering a child-focused approach. This is supported by a practitioners' ability to interact positively and voluntarily with children and young people ensures that practitioners are able to recognise and evidence the impact of parental support on children and young people. It is also important in developing good relationship with parents. Once established, positive interaction between practitioners and children can be used as a way of breaking down barriers and as a basis to help develop relationships with parents. It also allows practitioners to use modelling behaviour, to encourage parents to recognise and mimic positive interactions with their children.

How the evaluation gathered information for findings and conclusions

The research employed a multi-method approach, incorporating the following activities:

- **a review of existing literature.** The purpose was to establish evidence of the:
 - importance of effective relationships with parents in contributing to achieving outcomes for children and young people
 - qualities, skills and knowledge required by practitioners to develop effective relationships with vulnerable parents
 - organisational qualities required to support the development of effective relationships.

Evidence from the literature review was used to produce the draft 'Skills Framework'.

Clearly defined search criteria (see the report's Annex A) were used to collate a wide variety of documents, including published research and evaluation reports, policy documents, press articles, as well as 'grey literature' on websites. This preliminary search identified 75 documents, which appeared to have some relevance to the aims of the literature review. A total of 32 documents were identified from the original 75 for more in-depth analysis in order to highlight the key features of effective relationships between practitioners and vulnerable parents.

It is important to note that all documents selected for in-depth review had either some reference to effective relationships or were viewed to be of use in the development of the draft Skills Framework. References are provided in the report's Annex B.

The report concludes that the international and UK literature in this area was found to be mainly focused on social work practice. It was therefore challenging to isolate literature that focused on the important features of practitioner-parent relationships in broader service settings, particularly any that related specifically to the voluntary and community sector.

- **consultation with an expert advisory group**

- **case study research**

The purpose of the case study research was two-fold. Firstly, it provided the opportunity for Action for Children managers and practitioners to provide feedback on the draft Skills Framework. Secondly, it provided evidence of ways in which Action for Children practitioners are delivering effective relationships with vulnerable parents, across varying service contexts, and how these result in positive outcomes for children, young people and families.

Action for Children selected five sites as case studies for this research and each of the four nations (Northern Ireland, Wales, Scotland and England) were represented. Outcomes data was collected across the five case study areas to provide an understanding of the outcomes achieved by Action for Children services. It is important to highlight that these findings are from selected areas and are therefore not necessarily representative of Action for Children services overall. By selecting case study sites that have an established reputation for delivering improved outcomes for children and young people the research has sought to unpick the contribution that a good relationship with parents makes to achieve those outcomes.

Across the case study areas interviews and focus groups were undertaken with:

- six Action for Children managers
- 21 delivery practitioners
- 36 parents
- six wider stakeholders (e.g. referral agencies, links services).

Case study areas also provided data they held on the outcomes achieved for children, young people and families from their involvement in Action for Children services. Report cards, annual reports and external evaluation reports were collected across areas.

Further details about the SCS evaluation of this report are available on request. Please contact info@scsn.org.uk

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