

# RESEARCH INTO *practice*

News from the Scottish Executive about research in social work and social care

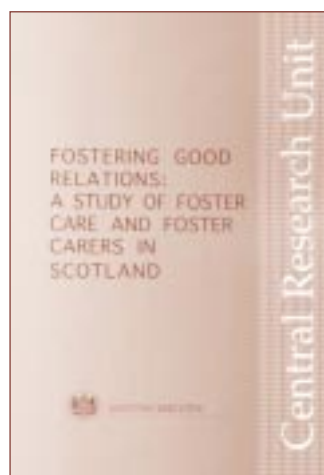
No 3 – Sept 1999

## Good support reduces foster carers' sense of isolation

Good support from social workers or link workers is essential if the loss of foster carers is to be reduced, according to former foster carers in Scotland.

A study of rates of loss of foster carers has revealed that the main reasons why carers ceased to foster included dissatisfaction with the service (26%), retirement or illness (19%), adoption of the foster child (18%), the children's behaviour (17%), the need to work or to move (15%), the impact on the carer's own family (15%), stress (10%) and the biological parents' bad behaviour (5%).

The study found a low annual loss of carers – 7% on average – and recruitment of new carers exceeded losses by 6%. Despite this, a third of the children referred for fostering over a six-week period remained unplaced. The approach to recruitment was found to be largely unsystematic, lacking a long-term strategy and a targeted marketing approach.



The research looked at the relationship between carers and social workers and the agency overall and found that former carers were much more critical of the relationship. They were dissatisfied with the level of support available both to carers and children.

Specialist fostering workers tended to provide better support than workers in child care

teams or generic teams. Carers' main dissatisfaction with social workers concerned infrequency of visits, failure to respond to messages, lack of background information and lack of support when children proved difficult.

Foster carers frequently felt unappreciated and not part of the team. Despite all these factors, the research found that the average carer had been fostering for more than seven years.

◆ *Fostering good relations: a study of foster care and foster carers in Scotland*; John Triseliotis, Moira Borland and Malcolm Hill; £6.00; Scottish Executive Central Research Unit; September 1999.

## Wide variations in early intervention for older people

A new study has explored the extent to which local authorities are developing preventive strategies and services for older people. It defined 'prevention' as services which prevent or delay the need for more costly intensive services; and strategies and approaches which promote the quality of life of older people and engagement with the community.

A key aim of the study was to identify how far older people had been involved in developing preventive approaches. The study found involvement varying from limited consultation to substantial involvement in strategy development and service delivery. Where such involvement existed, it generated commitment and ownership, not just among older people themselves but among local partner agencies.

The study, commissioned by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation and Anchor Trust and carried out by the Nuffield Institute for Health at Leeds, was based on questionnaires sent to every local authority and health authority in ➤

England, interviews with staff in 25 areas and field visits to five areas where preventive working appeared to be well developed.

The research found that a number of authorities were beginning to promote a preventive agenda. However, there were real tensions between the wish to promote quality of life and general well-being of older people and the service needs of individuals. Where powerful individuals in local agencies were committed to improving older people's lives, their needs and wishes were more likely to be reflected in corporate priorities and budgets.

◆ Promoting well-being: developing a preventive approach with older people; £15 including p&p from Anchor Trust, Fountain Court, Oxford Spire Business Park, Kidlington, OX5 1NZ; further information from Eileen Waddington, Nuffield Institute for Health, Leeds; tel: 0113 233 6352; hessew@leeds.ac.uk

## Befriending service shown to reduce bullying and truancy

An evaluation of the befriending service at Barnardo's Hopscotch project in Arbroath was carried out in the winter of 1998-99.

Hopscotch aims to reduce the disadvantage to children of being part of a family where alcohol abuse prevents healthy functioning. It was established in 1997 as a collaborative venture between Tayside Council on Alcohol, Tayside Health Board, Health Education Board for Scotland, Angus Social Work Department and Barnardo's.

It has a range of services, particularly volunteer befriending and health education. The report of an evaluation of the befriending service suggests that Hopscotch is meeting a need and helping children to reclaim part of their lost childhood, as well as giving them an opportunity, and the ability, to choose a positive future.

While the project is at an early stage of development, the responses in the evaluation interviews suggest that the befriending service has been effective and efficiently executed by the staff, since it has contributed to enabling the child to establish and maintain a viable role within the family, school and community. There is evidence of a reduced level of isolation at school, a marked reduction in absenteeism and, in some instances, of being bullied.

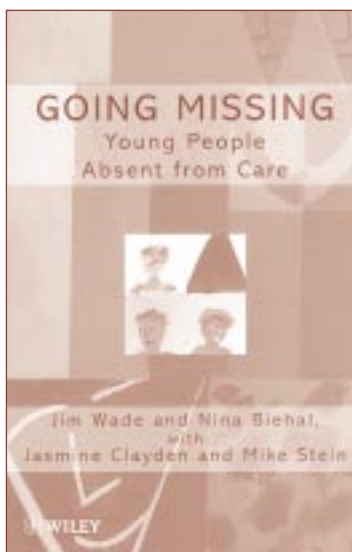
The children are taking a wider interest in leisure activities, and making choices about spending time doing something more active with their recreational time. They are gaining a better understanding of alcohol-related issues, and they are feeling more listened to. They also feel able to make more positive choices about their actions, in order to avoid stressful situations.

◆ Hopscotch is a good friend; Tish Traynor; February 1999; further information from Dr Mike Hughes, Principal Officer, Research and Development, Barnardo's; Tel: 0191 281 6223; pdubarnardos@compuserve.com.

## Young people who 'go missing' from care

The planning and co-ordination done by social workers is vital to the development of an effective response to children who go missing, according to newly published research.

'Where child care planning was effective, it helped to prevent drift, sharpen responses and clarify the roles and responsibilities of all those involved,' it concludes.



On the other hand, when planning and co-ordination become the social worker's principal task, the reduction in direct contact with the young people looked after makes it more difficult for social workers to achieve a holistic understanding of their needs.

These are just a few of the findings of a major piece of research, based on a sample of 210 young people in four English local authority areas and 32 community homes. It found that only one of the authorities provided guidance to its social workers on children who run away, and none of the them required social workers to interview young people when they returned.

The proportion of young people who went missing from community homes in the course of a year varied from 25% to 71%. There were big differences between individual homes, with

## Involving families in child protection conferences

Social workers involved in child protection conferences may need training to ensure that they involve the men in families instead of concentrating their attention solely on the mothers.

A survey carried out at the University of Northumbria at Newcastle found that some parents felt marginalised and excluded by the proceedings. Fathers in particular often felt they were ignored.

'Practice which does not include men in families holds women responsible for the safety and well-being of children, ignores issues of power and devalues the contribution men make in raising children,' the report says.

'Social workers need to involve the men in families. Both partners should be involved as a matter of course. Avoidance of men needs to be addressed in supervision and training, and good practice guidelines drawn up. Social workers' fears and concerns about involving men in families need to be explored in each case. Where the issue is domestic violence, neither the issue nor the perpetrator should be ignored.'

■ The systems for family support and child protection should be more closely integrated, research into child protection conferences, carried out at York University, suggests.

It recommends that community based services – such as in Easterhouse, Glasgow – should be

developed, to offer more effective post-conference services and widely available preventive service provision. Tighter criteria for referrals would enable a more flexible response to allegations of abuse.

Where the interests of family member diverge, two workers may be needed. In some conferences, partial exclusion may reduce potential conflict and be in the child's best interests. Good supervision and administrative backup is needed, and a more explicit recognition of the power bases of the intervention.

The research, which looked at the work of 22 local authority social workers in one city, highlights the conflicts of interest produced when social workers attempt to make a risk assessment while at the same time trying to work in partnership with the family.

'Child protection conferences are set up as if they are about decision making, although the evidence suggests the decisions are already made. Professional judgments were generally not changed as a result of discussion in the conference.'

◆ Parents' experience of child protection investigations; Kath Whitfield and Lin Harwood; Practice, Vol 11 No 2, 1999.

◆ Working in partnership in child protection: the conflicts; Margaret Bell; British Journal of Social Work, 29, 1999.

just four of the 32 homes accounting for 42% of total absences. Going missing from foster care appeared to be less common, but was difficult to measure because of the lack of central monitoring by local authorities.

Social workers showed a pervasive sense of powerlessness about preventing young people from going missing and as a result their morale and confidence were often affected.

'The close involvement of social workers tended to be valued by caregivers and young people. Where social workers were distant, levels of satisfaction dipped sharply. For a number of young people in the sample, a lack

of clear planning and of a strategic response to their careers of going missing appeared to be hastening their decline.'

◆ Going missing: young people absent from care; Jim Wade, Nina Biehal, Jasmine Clayden and Mike Stein; £16.99; John Wiley and Sons Ltd.

## Implementation the key to effective work with offenders

This report offers a list of factors which can increase the likely success of work with offenders. The factors are broken down into four main categories: general organisational ➤

factors; programme factors; change agent; and staffing activities.

Successful programmes tend to be operated by organisations which have a history of adopting new initiatives; of putting new initiatives efficiently into place; and of resolving issues in a non-confrontational manner.

They are based on an empirically documented need; backed up by credible scientific evidence; and do not overstate the gains to be realised.

The programmes that work tend to be run by individuals who possess detailed knowledge of the agency and its staff; who require the support of senior agency officials as well as line staff; and who command professional credibility. They often have a previous history of successful programme implementation in the agency's area of activity.

Success is also more likely if the staff involved understand the theoretical basis of the programme and have participated in its design.

◆ The forgotten issue in effective correctional treatment: program implementation; Paul Gendreau, Claire Goggin and Paula Smith; *International Journal of Offender Therapy and Comparative Criminology*, 43(2) 1999.

## Joint approach by mental health and children's services

A joint approach between adult and children's services is essential in cases requiring mental health assessments if children are to be protected from danger, research suggests.

This recommendation emerges from a study of social workers carrying out mental health

assessments involving parents in seven local authorities in the Manchester area. Half of all the children in the families concerned were under eight years old and in 40% of cases there was concern about the children's safety.

Four mothers (7% of the sample) had made threats to kill their children who were aged between two and nine years old, and in 14 cases (24%) child protection procedures had been initiated within the previous month, at the same time, or as a consequence of, information which emerged from the assessment.

'The dangers to children who were living with very disturbed parents were serious and real, and deserved assessment in their own right,' the report concludes. 'There was a large proportion of very young children, and children living with lone parents among those referred in crisis. Challenges for the services emerged from the impact on parenting and mental health from the misuse of alcohol and drugs, and from the aftermath of abusive experiences in childhood.'

A joint approach between services would ensure adequate consideration of the longer term developmental needs of children, as well as managing the immediate situation appropriately.

Social workers need to be aware of the continuing vulnerability and particular needs of children whose parents present in mental health crisis, it says.

◆ Assessment of parents by Approved Social Workers under the Mental Health Act 1983; Jeni Webster, Barbara Hatfield and Hadi Mohamad; *Practice*, Vol 11 No 2, 1999.

**The Scottish Executive is keen to publicise recent, relevant research about social work. If you know about such work, please send details to the Scottish Executive Central Research Unit, Room 53, James Craig Walk, Edinburgh EH1 3BA. Mark your envelope 'Research into Practice'.**

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