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A Service User Perspective of Child Protection Conferences in England.

Kerry Muench, Clive Diaz, and Rebecca Wright

Abstract

The overall purpose of a child protection conference is to safeguard children. They are multi-agency meetings that aim to ensure children's safety, promote children's health and development and identify when a child is at continuing risk of significant harm. Law and policies in the UK highlight that parents and children should be involved in this process and that their wishes and feelings should be listened to and heard by professionals, yet several research studies show that this is not happening. This study also explores how much parents, children and young people understand about the purpose of child protection conferences and whether they feel actively involved in them.

Twenty-three children and twenty-six corresponding parents were interviewed, all of whom are currently going through the child protection process and have children subject to a child protection plan. The ages of children interviewed were between 8 – 18 years old; all children were still living at home with at least one parent.

This study concludes that children and young people's understanding of child protection conferences and their participation within them is minimal; highlighting that the methods used to engage children in this process are largely ineffective. Most parents felt unsupported throughout the child protection process and the majority did not find their social workers helpful, which could increase the likelihood of disengagement and may inhibit the cycle of change.

Similar research studies conclude comparable results, yet practice within the child protection system does not seem to be developing in terms of improving service user participation.

Context

As of March 2014, 48,300 children were subject to child protection plans in England (NSPCC, 2014). Outline child protection plans are implemented at an Initial child protection conference, where information relating to the welfare of a child is shared in a multi agency

meeting. Working together To Safeguard Children (2015), states social workers should ensure the child and their parents understand the purpose of the conference; conference reports should be shared with the family beforehand, and they should help prepare the child if they are attending.

Professionals need to work closely with each individual family to try and increase participation, encourage joint working and offer support in times of crisis. It has been argued in the past that including parents in planning can be a motivating force for parents to cooperate with the plan and create a higher likelihood of change (Faller, 1981). Children also need to be included in planning:

'Participation by children matters, not only because it is an acknowledgement of their civil rights but because without listening to children and understanding how they experience their world, how can we begin to determine what will ensure their protection and enable them to grow into healthy adults?'

(Schofield and Thoburn, 1996, p.1).

Organisations are becoming aware that, when listened to, children and young people can play a fundamental role in the planning and delivery of services. Recent government initiatives such as Every Child Matters (2003) and the Children Act (2004) have highlighted the importance of children's wishes and feelings and the importance of including children's perspectives in planning and intervention (Lancaster, 2007). The Children Act (1989), Children Act (2004) and The 1990 United Nation Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) play significant roles in providing a legal framework for listening to children and recognising the need for the child's voice to be heard in decision-making processes. Elieen Munroe's 2011 report highlighted the distinction between 'doing the right thing' for the child, i.e.: checking whether children and young people are being helped, rather than 'doing things right' i.e.: following procedures. The Family Justice Review (2011) was completed to work in tandem with Munro's recommendation for a more child-centred system. The review focussed on ensuring that all decisions relating to the child should take the wishes and feelings of children and young people into account, considering their age and level of understanding. It highlighted the need for children and young people to be given age appropriate explanations about the processes affecting them and that they should be supported as early as possible to make their own views known to professionals. However, it is important that children are given a choice in how to communicate their opinions; otherwise it may be considered tokenistic.

The meaning of participation is generally the process of sharing decisions that affect one's life (Hart, 1992). In order for participation to be successful it is imperative that organisations are committed to genuine, rather than tokenistic, participation. This applies to child protection conferences where parents and children need to be given the opportunity to form their own views and communicate them.

Hart's (1992) 'ladder of participation' is widely used to understand the balance between children and adults in decision-making. To meet the lowest step of the ladder of participation; assigned but informed participation, children must understand the intentions of the project, know who made the decisions concerning their involvement and why, children must have a meaningful role and volunteer for the project after it is made clear to them (Hart, 1992).

Lundy (2007) identified space, voice, audience and influence, as factors requiring consideration when involving children meaningfully in decision making. This model states children require a space in which they are encouraged to express their views, children should be given a range of options in which to share their opinion, views should be listened to by those who make decisions and taken into account.

It is paramount to gain the wishes and feelings of children and young people to be able to see the world through their eyes. This ensures the services that are delivered are more effective in meeting the needs of the child (Lancaster, 2007). Involving children and young people in the decision-making process involves ensuring their voice is represented, whether this is directly or indirectly. Children and young people should be given space and a range of opportunities to participate. This may be done verbally by the child or young person, by an advocate or via drawings, photographs, audio recordings, writing, and other visual-based documents (Lancaster, 2007). However, whilst the UNCRC (1990) gives children and young people the right to express their views, they are not obligated to participate if they are not willing and this decision should be respected (Lancaster, 2007).

Participation can be seen as a protective factor for vulnerable children and young people, leading to increased levels of confidence, self-efficiency and self-worth (Schofield, 2005). However, maltreated children who are not involved may be left with feelings of powerlessness (Bell, 2002). Direct research with children carried out by Milner and Carolin (1999) showed that children and young people felt that they were not important and social workers did not listen to them. The importance of the relationship between social worker and the child has been highlighted in previous research as a significant factor to promote

participation, with children reliant on their social workers to provide this opportunity (Cossar et al, 2014).

Another empirical study carried out by Cleaver *et al* (2007) that aimed to explore children and parents' experiences of professional intervention found that parents felt social workers did not devote enough time to understand their circumstances and did not listen or take account of their views and opinions. This highlights the need to encourage children, young people, and parents to express their own individual opinions and views and assure them that their wishes will be acted upon wherever possible. Another study carried out by Corby, Miller and Young (1996) looked at parental participation at child protection conferences. The findings suggested that parent's involvement in the decision-making process was very limited, they recognised the need for more active involvement from parents in making decisions about the future protection of their children. They also recognised the need for changes in child protection conferences in order to ensure more ethical and effective participation.

The Child Protection Chair; an independent professional who has a key role and responsibility in managing the Child Protection Conference should ensure the conference is carried out in a way that engages parents and promotes children and young people's participation (Working Together, 2013). It is good practice for the chair to meet with the family prior to the conference to ensure they understand the purpose and the process; the chair should ensure the child's voice has been considered and that they are given time to express their views and opinions (Working Together, 2013). A more recent empirical research study looks into children and young people's views of the child protection system, and was carried out by The Office of the Children's Commissioner in 2011. Overall this study found that the majority of children, however, were not clear about the purpose of child protection conferences or the process in general; they often relied on parents for information, rather than professionals with a duty to inform. All older children interviewed had personally attended a conference and, although they had a better understanding of the purpose of the conference, few children saw social work reports or assessments and very few had seen their own child protection plans.

There is little previous research with a focus on children subject to child protection plans, who are still living at home (Cossar *et al*, 2014). The present study explores the experiences of parents, children and young people who are currently involved in the child protection process and their participation in conferences, an area which has received limited exploration in previous research.

Methodology.

Research Questions

1. To explore the opportunities given to children and parents to participate in child protection conferences.
2. To ascertain how far children and parents feel their wishes and feelings are taken into consideration within child protection conferences.
3. To explore the importance of the social worker relationship with service users.

Research Design

This research study will focus on qualitative, as opposed to quantitative, research methods as we felt this would gain a more in depth understanding of the topic (Thomas, 2003).

Semi-structured interviews were chosen; they are flexible and allow the interviewer to go into more depth on different questions depending on the service users responses (Thomas, 2003). Unlike questionnaires where detailed questions are formulated ahead of time, semi-structured interviews allow the opportunity to ask further questions if needed, enabling the interviewer to gain a deeper understanding of an individual's experiences. Clarity on the subject may also be sought if something is not clear (Thomas, 2003). When working with children and young people it is important to be creative; semi-structured interviews allow the interviewer to use pictures and tools which are a huge advantage when working with young children to help them understand the questions being asked and ensure the data being collected is a genuine reflection of the interviewees views (Babbie, 2004). We feel by using this research method it would allow me to make '*a truer assessment of what the respondent really believes*' (Robson, 2002).

According to Hill (2006), children and young people find interviews preferable to any other research method as it allows them to communicate in way they are most used to in their day to day lives (Holland *et al*, 2010). This is an additional reason for choosing this methodology as it helped ensure we were able to engage the target participants.

The children and young people, who took part in the study, were provided with information about the research in age appropriate and pictorial format. All interviews took place within the family home in familiar surroundings to the participants. Children and young people were

offered a choice of methods by which to participate in the interviews. This included the use of pictures to provide a visual representation of a child protection conference, prompting discussion regarding the participant's experiences of these meetings.

Sampling

This study aimed to interview twenty-five children and young people between the ages of 8-18 and twenty-five parents in one local authority. The reasoning for the varying age range was to ensure a wide range of views were gathered from children and young people and to look at their level of understanding of the child protection system at different stages of their development. Holland *et al* (2010) explains there are ethical issues in relation to interviewing children under the age of eight and gaining informed consent is not simple, therefore we elected to only interview children over eight years old. All of the children taking part in the study were currently subject to a child protection plan and were still living at home with at least one parent.

In April 2014 there were 124 children and young people on child protection plans in the Local Authority. However, seventy-one of these children were unborn or under eight years old so were not eligible to take part. The other fifty-seven children and young people were contacted as a 100% response rate was unlikely; twenty-two children and young people agreed to be interviewed and twenty-six parents. It has been argued that children who are old enough and have a level of maturity to understand the meaning of research should be allowed to decide about their own participation, without parental consent being a requirement (Coyne, 2010). For this study consent was sought from both parents and children, however, parents were able to decline on their children's behalf if they did not wish them to take part.

Fifteen parents did not want to take part in the study and did not want their children to take part, ten parent's contact details were incorrect, and seven interviews with young people were cancelled and were unable to be rearranged. Four parents agreed to take part in the study but did not wish their children to take part.

Ethical approval was given by Bristol University Ethics Committee before this research study was carried out

Results

For the purpose of this study, younger children will be categorised as those aged 8-12 years (12 children) and adolescents as 13-18 years (10 children).

Sample Demographic

A total of 22 children and young people took part in the study, from 19 families. There were 14 girls and 8 boys. Their ages ranged from 8 – 18 years (mean 11yrs, 7 months). The mean age of the girls (11 yrs, 1 month), was slightly older than that of the boys (10yrs, 6months). 95% of children were white British and 5% were from a minority ethnic group, all were living with at least one birth parent. The categories of the children's plans were as follows: emotional abuse 11, physical abuse 2, sexual abuse 1, and neglect 8.

A total of 26 parents were interviewed, from 23 families. There were 21 women and 5 men. Their ages ranged from 27 – 50 years (mean 37). The mean age of the women was (35yrs, 7 months) slightly older than the mean age of the men (34yrs, 5 months). 95% of parents were white British and 5% were from a minority ethnic group.

Within the following themes, children and young people's views are considered first, followed by the perspective of parents.

Themes

1. Understanding and Experience of child protection conferences

Children:

The results from this study suggest that very few children had meaningful understanding of a child protection conference and the purpose of these meetings. The children's understanding was rated into 2 categories; minimal understanding and partial understanding. Results showed that 9 out of 22 children had partial understanding; they had some knowledge of the child protection system but this knowledge was not entirely accurate. 7 of these were adolescents, and 2 were younger children, all of whom had personally attended a child protection conference at some point during the child protection process.

'They talk about us and how we are doing' (Female, aged 12yrs).

The other children had minimal understanding; they were able to discuss their social workers visiting but they did not go to meetings and had no understanding of these.

'They talk about stuff I'm not allowed to hear' (Female, aged 9yrs).

This demonstrates that very few children have a meaningful understanding of the purpose of child protection conferences. None of the children suggested that the meetings were to discuss their well-being or make decisions about their life. Children who had personally attended a child protection conference had a better understanding of what they were about and their purpose than those children who had not but they still only had partial understanding. Of the children who had minimal understanding of a child protection conference, 8 wanted someone to take the time to explain the purpose of these meetings. When asked who they would want to explain this to them, most children said a parent but 2 also said their social worker. The other 5 children and young people did not want to know about the meetings because they felt it was not anything to do with them and they were not interested.

As mentioned above; out of the 22 children interviewed only 9 children had personally attended a child protection conference, 7 adolescents and 2 younger children. 4 of these had an advocate to support them through the process but some children did not feel prepared or supported. Below are quotes from children who reported a negative experience of attending a conference:

'I felt prepared but it was not a good experience. I prepared myself and thought I would have a say. Afterwards I stormed out crying and never went back. The chair asked me a question then shut me off. I felt they were there for my mum's behaviour, not to support us' (Female, aged 18yrs).

'I was told to 'shut up' in a conference once by my social worker. I feel I get an input but feel like I'm the mediator between my social worker and my parents' (Female, aged 17yrs).

None of the children who had attended a conference had been told the outcome of the meeting, none of them were able to identify any actions or goals of the meeting. The children

described feeling disappointed by this and that the meeting had been a waste of time as they still did not know what they needed to do for things to change.

Only 2 adolescents had seen all or part of a social work report or assessment and 20 had not seen one at all. For the children who had seen a report or assessment this was linked to the attendance of a child protection conference. One was shared by a teacher at school and one adolescent read through it themselves; neither was shared by a social worker.

'I read through the report myself, the social worker didn't go through it with me and I found it very confusing. I only read one though as my mum said I shouldn't because it will upset me' (female, aged 13yrs).

Parents:

Parents were also asked about their understanding of a Child Protection Plan, Core Group Meeting, Child Protection Conference, Core Assessment and a Social Work Report. Most parents had heard of these and understood their purpose, yet 1 parent had not heard of a Core Assessment and 1 parent had not heard of a Social Work Report; which are two fundamental aspects of social work involvement. All parents had attended a child protection conference but the majority did not feel prepared for it, especially the initial conference. Below are quotes from parents who had poor experiences of attending a child protection conference:

*'The first conference was terrifying, I didn't know what was happening'
(Female, aged 42yrs)*

'I wanted more support for the initial conference, I felt blindfolded, it was like a lamb being led to slaughter' (Female, aged 41yrs)

'I was told of an allegation 1 day before the conference and I had no time to get a solicitor' (Female, 27yrs).

Parents were asked if the discussion during conference was easy to understand and follow; the majority said that they were, but one parent found the words that the professionals were using to be unclear. Parents were asked if they felt they were able to express their views and say everything that was important to them during the conference. Again the majority of parents said that they were able to do this. However, this was only when they were asked a

direct question by the chair; parents suggested that they rarely initiated discussion. Some parents felt that their words had been twisted and that they had to scream and shout to be heard. Below are some quotes from parents who did not feel they were able to get their point across:

'I had to scream and shout I raised my voice but it's just natural to have to do that during a conference' (Female, aged 29yrs)

'There were so many people there (in the conference) that I felt intimidated. People talked over me or twisted what I said' (Female, aged 43yrs)

'There is too much authority in one room on one person. It's intimidating, no-one is the perfect parent. I felt like a rabbit in the headlights. They didn't understand my point of view and didn't listen, I gave up in the end' (Female, aged 41yrs)

Parents were asked how they felt at the end of a conference, 21 parents described the experience in a negative way, using words such as; 'emotional', 'upset', 'frustrated', 'not listened to', 'relieved', 'intimidated', 'tearful', 'stressed', 'waste of time', 'angry', and 'confused'.

'Makes you feel like a school kid and inferior' (Female, aged 44yrs)

'I felt like I was being put into a corner' (Female, aged 41yrs)

'I was worn out. It is traumatic' (Female, aged 43yrs)

Different reports and assessments are shared with parents throughout the child protection process and parents were asked who shared these with them and how this was done. All parents had seen assessments and reports but how these were shared varied depending on the individual social worker. 22 parents explained that their child's social worker had shared the report, 1 was shared by a health visitor, 1 by the child protection chair, and 2 parents could not remember how the report was shared.

The majority of parents stated that the report was sent out in the post and was not discussed with them; others explained that the social worker would meet with them on the day of the conference and go through it with them quickly before going straight into the meeting.

'Sometimes they were sent out in the post late. One social worker went through it with me on the day of the conference' (Female, aged 29yrs).

The majority of parents wanted the social worker to share reports and assessments a few days before the conference and to take the time to discuss it with them. 1 parent said they would prefer it to be sent in the post as they did not have a positive relationship with their social worker and 1 parent wanted to read through it on their own. Below are some responses from parents who would like the social worker to take the time to go through the report with them:

'I want a face to face discussion and a copy of the report, there is pressure to make a comment straight away but I need time to digest it so I can make an informed decision' (Female, aged 31yrs).

'Someone should come out and sit with you to go through it, it is an awful lot to take in' (Female, aged 43yrs).

'I want someone to come and share it with me face to face and explain it to me properly so it doesn't feel so rushed. Sometimes the social worker comes just to get me to sign it and is gone again within 10 minutes' (Female, aged 44yrs).

2. Complaint Procedure

The complaints system is very important in social work to ensure processes and practice can be improved and to ensure services are meeting the needs of children and their families. Out of 22 children, only 3 had been told about the complaint process and how to go about making a complaint if they wished to do so. Out of the 3 children that had been told how to make a complaint, 2 older children had made one and had experienced a positive change. 1 adolescent explained:

'My social worker used to be really horrible to me but after the complaint she started being nicer'. (Male, aged 12yrs)

The other adolescent's complaint resulted in a change of social worker.

Other children explained that they were never given the opportunity to make a complaint and were unsure how to do this or who they needed to talk to. Some children reported feeling

scared about making a complaint as they were uncertain of the implications to themselves and their family.

This was a similar response to parents; many talked of the consequences of making a complaint and felt that it was not worth the trouble. 8 out of 26 parents were told how to make a complaint, 3 of these parents had made a complaint to children's services about their social worker; all of whom were happy with the outcome.

3. Relationship with Social Worker

Children:

The final theme to be analysed is the relationship between child-social worker and parent-social worker. All children had a mixture of positive and negative feelings about their social workers, although the majority of these feelings were positive. 13 children used words such as; *'helpful'*, *'listens'*, *'understanding'*, *'trust them'*, *'makes things better'*, *'reliable'* and *'approachable'* to describe their social worker. The children who had built a good relationship with their social worker felt much more positively about them:

'I feel I have someone to talk to, I can call them if I'm upset or worried about anything'
(Female, aged 14yrs).

'I felt like I had someone to speak to and could let my worries out. They are there when you need them' (Female, aged 13yrs).

'She has helped my mum with her drinking, she has made the environment safer for me and my brother. I feel safer now' (Female, aged 12yrs).

Those children who had not built a positive relationship with their social worker were a lot more negative in their description, using words such as; *'bossy'*, *'doesn't listen'*, *'nosey'*, *'annoying'*, *'doesn't tell me what's happening'*, *'she cancels'*, and *'is always late'*.

'They made me feel depressed, I won't speak to them. They haven't helped, they just make things worse. You say something to them and they make it out to be ten times worse than it is' (Female, aged 17yrs).

'I don't like talking to her, she talks too much and for too long' (Male, aged 11yrs).

Children who positively described their social worker had a better relationship with them and overall felt as though social workers had helped and made a change to their family life; home life had improved and things were generally better since their involvement. Children and young people who negatively described their social workers on the other hand felt as though they were a waste of time and that nothing had changed since their work commenced. It is also interesting to note that the majority of children who described the relationship with their social worker as negative, their parents also described the relationship with the social worker as negative. This shows that the way children perceive their social worker often depends on the way their parents view the social worker as well as the way the social worker interacts with their parents. If the social worker treated their parents in an honest and respectful manner, children were more likely to be positive about them. However, Tomlinson (2013) suggests that children who have experienced abuse are often wary about what they say; most children are able to distinguish the difference between the things they talk about with parents, teachers and strangers. So it may be that the children whose parents were negative about social work involvement felt that they should say what their parents wanted to hear even if they did not feel that way.

Parents:

The majority of parents described having a poor relationship with their social worker and used negative words to describe them such as; *'undermining'*, *'dishonest'*, *'contradicting'*, *'twists what I say'*, *'misunderstood my problems'*, *'doesn't explain what is happening'*, *'nosey'*, *'cancels'* and *'always late'*. However, 9 parents were positive about social work involvement and found social workers *'approachable'* and *'trustworthy'*.

'The social worker always keeps me updated in everything and I feel really included'
(Female, aged 28yrs).

'The social worker pulls everyone together and does the best for the children. It is the hardest job in the world' (Male, aged 50yrs).

Although the majority of parents in this study did not feel they had a positive relationship with their child's social worker, those who did felt included in the process, which implies that a good relationship between parents and the social worker increases participation and positive involvement.

During the interview process many children and parents reported a regular change of social worker with varying input and involvement. This was clearly a significant issue for them and it made it a lot more difficult for parents and children to build up a positive and trusting relationship with their social worker.

Discussion

1. To explore the opportunities given to children and parents to participate in child protection case conferences.

The extent of the understanding of the child protection process from children's perspectives was largely age-related. This suggests that children and young people are not being given age appropriate information relating to Child Protection Conference's and are therefore not given the opportunity to attend these meetings. Working Together to Safeguard Children (2013) states that children of sufficient age, depending on their development, should be invited to conferences. However within the confines of this study very few children had attended a conference, suggesting that even older children who should be given this opportunity are not actively involved in the process or encouraged to take part. Although children should be given this opportunity, it should not be assumed that all children want to participate in this process; results within this study show that 5 children did not want to be involved.

Children's lack of knowledge around the child protection process supports previous research. The findings of children's views in this study were similar to that of The Office of the Children's Commissioner (2011). The majority of children were not clear about the purpose of a child protection conference, few children had attended a conference and even fewer had seen a social work assessment or report. Older children had a better understanding of the child protection process as did those children who had personally experienced a conference. Cossor *et al* (2014) found that children who had attended a child protection conference described them as difficult, they felt that they were not listened to by professionals, and felt under prepared which was also confirmed by this study. Only 6 out of 26 children in the study by Cossor *et al* (2014) had seen all or part of their assessment or report compared to 2 children within this study; both of whom were older children. Similar numbers of children had attended a child protection conference and feelings regarding this experience were comparable. Children did not feel listened to during conferences in either study and described them as a negative experiences. This is evidence that children need to

be better supported and prepared for this highly stressful and emotional process as, currently; it is an oppressive experience for children and young people.

Cossor *et al* (2014) found that younger children were able to identify aspects of the child protection process but struggled to understand the reason for social work involvement due to limited information being provided to them, this was again a finding in this study; it was found that younger children in particular had a minimal understanding.

Social workers should share information with children and young people and provide support for them to understand assessments and reports (Bell, 2002; Cleaver *et al*, 2004). This should be done in an accessible way to enable children to understand what is going on in their lives; yet the 2 reports shared in this study were by a teacher and a parent. In relation to parents; a high number complained that the social worker had shared the report with them on the day of the conference which does not give enough time to take in all of the information, challenge any inaccuracies and analyse it properly. The majority of parents within this study wanted the social worker to share the report with them a few days prior to conference as local guidance suggests, yet two parents wanted to read through the report themselves; highlighting the importance of recognising and respecting individual differences (BASW, 2012).

Local authorities should ensure reports for child protection conferences are shared with children and young people in advance of the meeting in an age appropriate manner. Thought should be given to how such reports are communicated; with the child protection chair ensuring they meet with children and young people prior to the conference to allow their views to be heard.

The outcome of conferences also needs to be shared with children and parents, the children in this study who had attended a conference reported that they were not informed of the outcome. Hart's Ladder of Participation (1992) would view this as manipulation; children were consulted to take part but were not given any feedback.

Lancaster (2007) discussed the importance of including children from the very beginning of social work involvement from planning through to evaluation, for them to be fully included and to be able to genuinely participate. However, many children within this study had a minimal understanding of the child protection process so it may not be possible for them to contribute to a plan that they do not understand. Furthermore, children are not being included in the evaluation process as none of the children interviewed knew the outcome of

the child protection conference or were able to identify any objectives or any parts of their child protection plan.

Research undertaken in the past by Corby, Miller and Young (1986) looked at parental participation at Child Protection Conferences. Findings suggested that parent's involvement was very limited and parents did not feel prepared for conference, especially the Initial Conference and also did not feel that they were listened to by the chair. This is concerning when statutory guidance clarifies that the role of the child protection chair is to ensure the conference is carried out in a way that engages parents (Working Together, 2013). It is imperative that social workers and child protection chairs work together to promote participation within the conference, yet parents describe feelings of intimidation. 21 parents experienced negative feelings after the conference, which highlights a need for intervention immediately after a child protection conference to ensure parents have understood what has been said, and are able to discuss any worries or concerns. Parent's leaving a child protection conference with high levels of agitation or frustration potentially place already vulnerable children at further risk of harm due to a likelihood of emotional over-reaction to problems (Omar, 2004).

2. To ascertain how far children and parents feel their wishes and feelings are taken into consideration during child protection conferences.

Munro (2011) highlights the importance of carrying out direct work with children to gain their wishes and feelings and to create a 'child centred' system. However, this can be difficult when children are reluctant to talk about their feelings for fear it will lead to an escalation of problems or sharing will get them into trouble with their parents after the social worker has left (O'Quigley, 2000). Social workers aim to see children alone to avoid this issue and to build a positive relationship with children to allow them to be open and honest about their wishes and feelings.

Out of the children interviewed, very few had actually attended a child protection conference; 7 adolescents and 2 younger children. All felt that they were not listened to and their wishes and feelings were not considered throughout. Children need the opportunity to be better prepared prior to conference and given a realistic expectation of what the experience is going to be like; more emphasis should be placed on social workers and child protection chairs to ensure this happens. The other children had limited understanding of a child protection conference which makes it difficult to measure whether their wishes and feelings

were gained by the social worker prior to conference to consider them in professional discussion.

The use of advocates has been shown to be of use to children and young people (Barnes, 2012). Findings in this study show that nearly half of the children who attended a child protection conference were supported by an advocate and these children were more positive about their experiences. This highlights the importance of representing children to ensure their wishes and feelings are heard.

Parents who had a good relationship with their social worker felt their wishes and feelings were considered and listened to during conference but the majority of parents felt that this was not the case; they were able to get their points across and say everything that was important to them but this does not mean their wishes and feelings were considered. Parents had little choice on who attended the conference and where it was held, although some parents did report having a say in what time the conference took place and reported the meeting being rearranged if they were unable to attend. All parents wished for fewer professionals to attend conference, especially from schools, but most understood the reason for their attendance and the importance of this.

3. To explore the importance of the social worker relationship with service users

Those children who described having a good relationship with their social worker also reported less negative feelings about the child protection process. Cossar *et al* (2014) found that a key theme throughout their study was the importance of a trusting relationship between child and social worker. This was also identified as corresponding theme throughout this research, highlighting the importance of trusting relationships.

Children are aware of the views and opinions professionals have towards their parents, and the views their parents have towards professionals. If the relationship between social worker and parent is difficult, it is likely the child will have a similar view to their parent, making it harder for the social worker to build a trusting relationship with the child and in turn reducing participation. Children and young people need to be involved in the child protection process and need to be able to make informed choices and decisions about their life with the support from their social worker. Butler-Sloss (1988) suggests that children engage better with social workers who take the time to listen and get to know the child, rather than bombarding them with questions. Therefore it is important to refrain from treating the child as an 'object of concern' and using them as a source of evidence.

Children and parents within this study both identified the high numbers of social workers that had been involved in their life and their desire for this to be reduced. It was felt this regular change made it more difficult for parents and children to build up a positive relationship with their social worker. Staff retention in the social work profession has been widely reported as a significant difficulty. Recruitment and retention of experienced social workers has been reported to be a challenge faced by local authorities across the country (Baginsky, 2013). Experiencing a change in social worker is a reality families may face.

Conclusion

The primary aim of this research study was to gain a service user perspective of child protection conferences. The views of children and parents within this study were similar to that of previous research into this area. The majority of children were not clear about the purpose of a child protection conference and their participation in them was found to be minimal. It is of interest that little has changed in regards to children and young people's views and experiences of the child protection process since the findings reported by The Office of the Children's commissioner (2011). This is despite the recent changes to policy and guidance reiterating the importance of the 'voice of the child'.

This study highlights the poor attendance of children at child protection conferences in the local authority where this research took place and this is a significant area for improvement. Both children and parents described child protection conferences as a negative experiences with parents reporting they felt unprepared and did not feel they were able to get their views across.

The majority of children described social work involvement in a positive light and felt their social worker had made a positive difference to their family life. Although the majority of parents did not take the same view as their children, there were parents who were grateful and appreciative of the help they have received from children's services

The complaint procedure was not included in the research questions in this study yet this was a common theme that emerged. This is a vital aspect of social work involvement to improve services and procedures (Carr, 2004). The majority of children and parents within this study were not informed how to make a complaint. Boylan and Dalrymple (2011) stress the importance of children being able to access complaints procedures to strengthen their

position. Service users need to feel empowered and have control over their lives; knowing that they are able to make a complaint provides an important sense of control (Audit Commission, 1999).

It is clear to professionals that child protection conferences are to safeguard children and to promote their well-being. The Children Act (1989), Children Act (2004) and Munro's report (2011) highlight the importance of engaging children and young people in the child protection system to ensure their voices are heard yet this does not seem to be happening. Children and young people are rarely attending conferences; and when they do they do not feel listened to or supported, and they have minimal or partial understanding of the process.

Children and parents need to be better informed regarding child protection conferences with information provided in an accessible format. The child protection process needs to be explained in a simplistic way, with reports and assessments tailored to each individual and shared in advance of the conference. Child protection chairs need to meet with parents and young people prior to the conference to ensure they understand the purpose of such meetings and to allow their views to be shared. Social workers need to be supportive throughout the process and explain the outcome and objectives, ensuring parents and young people have knowledge of the child protection plan, only then can social workers expect families to change.

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