

The Parent-Professional Relationship in Child Protection

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Key Messages

- Research evidence indicates the significance of the parent-professional relationship to implementation of early intervention, and the quality of relationship is linked to the personal and professional skills of each practitioner.
- The therapeutic relationship is regarded as an optimum medium to support learning and development of parenting skills. A change in the parent's perception of the child's world affects actions and behaviour – a key focus of child protection.
- A positive parent-professional relationship can support a parent to signal need and to seek help in the pre-crisis period.
- A positive relationship can be transferred from the pre-crisis to post-crisis context, and support a parent through child protection processes.
- A positive relationship with one professional can be used to forge relationships between a parent and an extended multi-disciplinary team.
- Legislation concerning the intended role of 'named person' will create a focus upon parent-professional relationships.



Introduction

The foundation of many professional disciplines is the dyad of service-provider, and service-user which creates opportunities for relationship-based practice. Professionals from health, education, social work, police, and the voluntary sector in Scotland form relationships with parents within the context of the National Practice Model, *Getting It Right for Every Child*¹. Recent guidance² has renewed the focus upon the formation of equal parent-professional partnerships as applicable to the parameters of each professional discipline. The professional has a

responsibility to understand the impact from personal characteristics, family/community culture, and societal expectations upon the parent-professional relationship, and subsequently the development of parents within a context of child protection.

This briefing paper presents past and current understanding of the parent-professional relationship in child protection, and indicates future direction in the context of recent legislation, and forthcoming changes to practice in August 2016.

What does the research tell us?

Importance

The response of services to children in need has changed over time. Historically, in the mid-1900s, child protection in the United Kingdom took a reactive approach^{3,4}. Society accepted that parents had the right to bring up their children within a birth family culture, and there was an assumption that the majority of parents had the capacity and ability to fulfil this role. Services would intervene if evidence indicated that a child had been harmed emotionally or physically. The parent-professional relationship was subsequently created in a context subject to legislation and formal parameters.

The rights of the child were at the heart of Scottish policies and procedures in the 1980s and 1990s⁵. The re-focusing debate on child protection which took place at this time extended knowledge and understanding, and legislation led to changes in practice within Scotland^{6,7} which continue in current service-delivery. A development in the referral process included the potential for a parent's voluntary involvement with services, and emphasised a shift from mandatory post-crisis intervention to a system which included preventative work, and a focus upon child welfare and achievement of potential¹. The parent-professional relationship is integral to this approach as a medium for communication, and implementing intervention to increase each child's life-chances.

There has been an increase in awareness of influential factors upon a child's development over the last century. The Ecological Systems of Human Development⁸ is a theoretical framework which informed creation of the National Practice Model, *Getting It Right for Every Child*. Documentation in this model, for example the Resilience Framework, Wellbeing Indicators, and My World Triangle, supports practitioners to represent adversities and protective factors in a format which enhances comprehension by linking theory and practice. Recording of vulnerability and resilience presents each child's interpretation and reaction to his world, and provides a basis for creation of a child's care plan.



Policy and practice^{9,10} recognise that parents are a child's primary educators who can be supported to learn and develop within the parenting role; therefore representing protective factors rather than adversities to their child's development. Currently, in the 21st century, the rights of each child *direct* decision-making and actions. The importance of the parenting role to children and society is publicised in the National Parenting Strategy for Scotland 2012 within this context of children's rights¹¹. Parents are described as "assets who will help Scotland to be the best place in the world to grow up..."

Relationship-based practice

Relationship-based practice has been recognised in the last 60 years as encompassed within the role of service-provider^{12,13}. The Plowden Report from 1967¹⁴ promoted partnerships between parents and professionals in education, and subsequently this concept was introduced to training for Scottish social service and care sectors in 1997¹⁵. Working in partnership with parents became an evidential registration requirement for practitioners from health, education and social work, and this approach is currently embedded within The National Practice Model. Registration with the Scottish Social Services Council¹⁶ has given practitioners access to multiple data-bases of information. Knowledge and understanding which is gained from reviewing current and past research on relationships, in addition to findings from significant case reviews, contributes to development of practice. Legislation on the intended role of "named person" will create a focus upon the parent-professional relationship in 2016¹⁷.

Relationships are important influences upon the socio-emotional development, and behaviour of humans¹⁸. The parent-professional relationship is significant within a context of child protection as a medium which contributes to re-formation of a parent's understanding of *self*. Child protection involves supporting parents to view their child's world from a different perspective; therefore affecting the parents' actions and behaviour.

Research on neglect of children in Scotland¹⁹ recommended that the positive effects from early interventions could be sustained, and "brokered" by good relationships between parents and professionals. The relational skills of a professional,²⁰ which includes the creation of relationships in a child's earliest years,^{21,22} was recently identified as a criteria for a successful outcome from early intervention. This knowledge has been applied successfully in Scotland in the form of The Family-Nurse Partnership²³. It is a model of preventative work which has been promoted since 2010, and initial results indicate a positive impact upon the protection of vulnerable children by intervening at an opportune period of childhood, and parenthood. Practice responds to the needs of first time teenage parents by using a voluntary relationship between young mother and health professional to implement early intervention. Strategies are based upon physical and emotional health needs of both the child and parent.

This formation of a therapeutic relationship is upheld by Rogers as he promoted that the first important step was a client actively seeking support in a voluntary context, and a professional demonstrating an understanding of the client's perspective through empathic responding²⁴. Empathy was regarded as a key characteristic of this relationship within a study on parental perceptions¹². The Family-Nurse Partnership aims to develop the intervention through integration with local services which respond to cultural needs of a community. Programmes which are implemented with *cultural sensitivity*²⁵ have been identified as effective approaches to engaging parents, and maintaining involvement over time.

A recent publication²⁶ has generated debate on the response to child protection by services as the authors have highlighted the necessity to impose a radical re-focus by using a holistic family approach as opposed to child-centred. Debate in the context of child protection is useful, and enables policy-makers, researchers and practitioners to seek out learning, and to enhance, change or consolidate society's response to this emotive topic. It may be that implementation of interventions in Scotland, within

the framework of the National Practice Model, do respond to the issues at local community level.

This framework links theory to practice by supporting practitioners to understand the influences from the ecological systems upon a child's development which includes the family context. An aim of child protection is the use of interventions to nurture, and develop the skills of birth parents in order that childhood can be experienced within a positive family culture. Stringent publicised evaluations continue to be necessary to support discussion and progress.

Perceptions

Each person interprets his or her world in a unique way and perceptions are the operating principles which determine behaviour of individuals or organisations. Operational perspectives are affected and modified by human interaction; therefore perceptions can alter over time^{27,28}. Learning leads to parents interpreting, and interacting with their world from new perspectives. Development results in parents identifying and responding to their children's needs, and fulfilling societal expectations in a context of child protection.



Rogers had noted that one purpose of a therapeutic relationship was to contain the negative emotions of the client in order to support re-formation of the inner working model²⁴. Therefore learning involves the professional educator imparting informational and emotional support to the parents. Magnusson and Stattin²⁹ describe a transfer of power in this relationship from service-provider to service-user, as learning occurs. This Social-Address Model promotes understanding of the dynamics and fluctuating circumstances of parent-professional relationships. Practitioners will recognise the application of the term “demand characteristics” which is demonstrated by a parent attempting to retain power in the relationship in order to gain support for parental needs, as opposed to the needs of a vulnerable child. Positive outcomes from early intervention are linked to convergence of professional and parental perceptions^{27,28}. Divergence in perceptions suggests that optimum conditions to support a positive outcome have not been realised. Research has indicated similarities and differences in perceptions which relate to social, emotional and cultural influences. A recent study³⁰ reported agreement by parents and professionals that a positive relationship can support parents to signal need, and to seek help in the pre-crisis period. Additionally participants expressed that a positive relationship can be used to forge links with the extended multi-disciplinary team, and be transferred to the post-crisis context. There was also divergence in perceptions as parents regarded child protection as a positive developmental influence, and conversely professionals perceived negativity.

These findings contrast with previous research which reported that parents had a negative perception of child protection processes, and professionals demonstrated positive attitudes^{27,28}. The parent-professional relationship provides a means for service-users and service-providers to acknowledge one another's perceptions, and to create a base of understanding which supports a period of learning. As a parent's interpretation of his or her world alters, the inner working model is reformed and ultimately affects actions, emotions and behaviour – a prime consideration in child protection.

Implications for practice

There may be a difference in understanding, and expectations in relation to child protection processes, responsibilities, and associative outcomes due to perception of the world by professionals or parents. This could affect the agreement of goals, recognition of progress, engagement of parents, and the creation of an equal parent-professional partnership.

This briefing paper suggests that policy and practice should recognise the parent-professional relationship, and perceptions within this dyad of service-user and service-provider, as significant to child protection. Training of the workforce will increase knowledge and understanding of relationship-based practice.

- Positive and negative perceptions of a parent can be recorded as protective factors or adversities within the resilience matrix from the National Practice Model³¹ in order to inform a child protection care plan, and importantly to recognise, and respond to change and development of a parent in this context. Evidence of change is sought by Core Groups, Children's Panel and legal representatives to inform decision-making.
- Promotion of practice associated with the intended role of 'named person' can be used to highlight the purpose, and significance of a therapeutic parent-professional relationship.

Debates on the potential role and responsibilities of the "named person," have been conducted formally and informally over the past few months, within the context of The Children and Young People's (Scotland) Act 2014¹⁷. It is proposed that health visitors and senior education staff will be appointed to this role, and embrace the associated responsibilities for children, aged 0-5 years and 5-18 years respectively.



Each relationship between a service-user and service-provider is unique and subject to a multitude of influences based upon the individual's interpretation, and reaction to the world. Perceptions are expressed through behaviour which is affected by emotion. Forming a positive relationship is a professional's responsibility which can be supported by the acquisition of knowledge, and the use of personality to enhance relational skills.

I have observed many practitioners using professional instinct in their reactions to vulnerable parents – that inherent emotive connection which evolves between a practitioner and a scared or angry parent in a context of child protection. Professional instinct can be transformed by practitioners reflecting upon, and critically evaluating their parent-professional relationships. Peer observation and constructive

feedback is an under-utilised resource for professional development. This objective evaluation of practice can contribute to a pedagogy within an organisation which responds to the needs of a community by highlighting the abilities of the workers. Regular discussion between colleagues, at the end of a working day, leads to identification of generic and personal strategies which can be applied with intent and purpose – consistently implementing, and role-modelling good relationship-based practice over time. Emotionally-based reactions to vulnerability develop into empathic therapeutic interactions which are supported by deeper understanding, and contribute to fulfilling the responsibilities of a professional role which is encompassed by guidance and legislation. Supervision of the workforce is necessary to ensure that delivery of services adheres to policy, and maintains standards. Support and supervision are mandatory regulated processes within the context of the social services, education and care

sectors; however it is important that these strategic mechanisms are applied in response to individual needs of professionals to ensure that each worker has the ability, capacity, and resilience to respond to emotive challenges, and to deliver an optimum service.

The relationship of professional and parent is a concept which will be explored, and evaluated over the next few years. It is expected to be a pivotal point for communication and dissemination of information to the integrated team. Each positive relationship which is created and maintained by professionals from health, education, social work, police, and voluntary sector will continue to provide a role-model of parent-professional partnership to support the application of legislation into practice, and to protect Scotland's children.

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Further resources

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