

RESEARCH INTO *practice*

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

No 4 – Nov 1999

Home visiting volunteers support families under stress

Regular home visits from supportive volunteers led to a marked improvement in the health and stability of Scottish families under stress.

An evaluation of volunteer support to families with at least one child under five reveals an increase in confidence and self-esteem, reduced use of anti-depressants and a reduced need for medical support.

Home-Start is a local home visiting scheme run by a team of volunteers under the guidance of a paid co-ordinator. There are 245 schemes in the UK and others around the world.

The evaluation looked at the 18 Home-Start schemes operating in Scotland last year. They had 407 volunteers, supporting 1,018 families (39% of them one-parent families) including 2,371 children, 70 of whom were on the Child Protection Register.

A random sample of 200 families were

approached and questionnaires were returned by 132 of them. Questionnaires were also received from 139 out of 200 co-ordinators and 109 out of 200 referrers (mainly health visitors and social workers).

Most of the families were visited every week and 73% of them said they felt able to talk to their volunteer about matters they could not discuss with their social worker or health visitor. The most common activities undertaken by volunteers were talking/listening (61%), outings (46%), playing with children (36%), respite (24%) and shopping (23%).

The most common reasons for referral were (post-natal) depression (46%), ill health (42%), pregnancy or new-born baby (30%), isolation (27%) and children's behaviour (23%).

In most cases, responses showed a reduction in loneliness and a corresponding increase in confidence. General health improvements were reported by 40% of respondents and a reduction in depression by 38%. (At referral, 59% of families included at least one person ➤

New on-line resource for social workers in Scotland

As announced in the first edition of *Research into Practice*, information about research in social work and social care is to be made available through ResearchWeb, a Web site being developed by the National Institute for Social Work with funding from the Scottish Executive.

In addition to detailed summaries of recent research findings, ResearchWeb will provide a gateway to the NISW Caredata database which contains more than 40,000 abstracts of reports, articles, books and other research publications.



ResearchWeb, which is being launched in December, will also offer an e-mail alerting service and many opportunities for users to tailor the service they receive to their needs.

with depression.) In 21% of cases anti-depressant medication ceased altogether.

Volunteers were valued as undemanding friends who helped in facing 'authority' figures. In 53% of cases, volunteers had accompanied families to appointments, giving them practical support and encouragement.

◆ Home-Start in Scotland: an evaluation; July 1999; £3.50 including postage from Home-Start UK, 41 Bruce Street, Dunfermline KY12 7AG; Tel: 01383 726429; Fax: 01383 726869; email: davemilliken@homestartukscot.freemove.co.uk

Adoptive parents positive about information exchange

A survey of an Adoption Information Exchange shows it provides a useful service to birth parents, adoptive families, and their children.

Postbox information exchanges were pioneered by voluntary adoption agencies as a way of maintaining indirect contact between adoptive

families and birth relatives while preserving the confidentiality of all parties. The idea has been taken up more recently by local authorities.

The scheme under evaluation, in Hampshire, allowed letters, photos, cards and gift vouchers, to be exchanged, usually once a year. The arrangements are set up by either the child's or, more rarely, the adoptive parents' social worker after consultation with the parties. Correspondence is channelled through the local authority's headquarters, where it is opened and photocopied.

Some of the birth families questioned were glad to have an opportunity to share in the child's progress; others just welcomed the reassurance that their child was alive and well. Responses from adopters showed a general acceptance of the exchange and a willingness to try to make it work.

Discussions about the information exchange were most commonly initiated by social workers before the placement. Forty per cent

Unlocking the past for adopted children

Looked after children growing into adulthood need access to as full and accurate an account of their history as possible, research with a group of former Barnardo's children suggests.

Thousands of adults who had been looked after by Barnardo's as children contacted the organisation after a television documentary revealed that more information about their backgrounds was available than they had previously believed. New social work posts had to be created to cope with the flood of applications from men and women, some in their 60s and 70s, who wanted to know more about their history, their birth parents and their siblings.

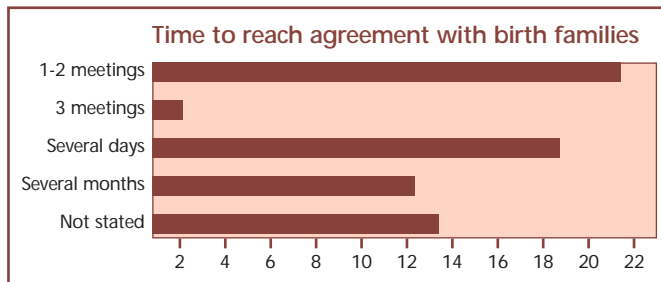
Because of the enormous demand, some applicants faced a long wait before seeing their files, and viewing the records was often an occasion of high tension and nervous anticipation. Reactions varied: the impact upon their sense of self was reported to be overwhelming for some, but of marginal importance for others. Those who had felt loved and wanted as foster children ascribed their interest in their records to 'mild curiosity' while those who had felt most unloved and

rejected as children sometimes attached great importance to establishing some of the facts about their origins.

Reflecting on the experience of discovery a year or more later, many of the adults found that their new knowledge confirmed their feelings that they had been better off in care than if they had remained with their birth families. With one exception, nobody regretted seeing their records, and all said they would recommend others to do the same.

The researchers comment that the process of communicating information from the files is a sensitive matter, requiring professional skills. 'Young people who have left care are often not seen as a priority for social work time and often don't receive the support that may be necessary for them to come to terms with their lives, through better knowledge and understanding of the past, before they can move on in adult life.'

◆ Unlocking the past: the experience of gaining access to Barnardo's records; Gill Pugh and Gillian Schofield; *Adoption and Fostering*, Vol 23, No 2, 1999.



of adoptive parents were receptive to the idea and discussion about it was brief; in 30% of cases, one to two hours were spent in discussion; and in 17% of cases, social workers engaged in several meetings over a period of weeks or months.

The researchers comment: 'Despite some criticisms, the survey shows that a postbox system can work, perhaps because there are some very special people involved – brave and positive adopters and birth parents who want it to work for their children.'

◆ Adoption information exchange: evaluation of a letterbox system in a local authority; Veronica Carter, Sally Magee and Rosalind Thoday; *Adoption and Fostering*, Vol 23, No 1, 1999.

Employers shying away from mental health problems

More widespread training and awareness-raising on issues concerning mental health and employment are called for by the report on research carried out for Fife Employment Access Trust.

The research, which included interviews with 70 employers and 30 people with mental health problems, found that many people are excluded from the labour market although they want to work and have a range of skills and experience.

Problems faced in finding work included employers' attitudes to mental health issues, the inflexibility of selection processes, difficulties in the transition from benefits to paid work, and difficulties in using public transport.

Difficulties in employment included employers' and colleagues' attitudes, the effects of disclosure of mental health problems and the lack of availability of support.

Most employers believed that mental health problems would affect an individual's ability to

carry out their work and said they would affect a recruitment decision.

The researchers recommend the establishment of clear and positive policies on mental health in the workplace, the development of preventive measures to reduce stress at work, and the provision of support to both individuals and employers.

◆ Mental health and employment issues; Reid-Howie Associates; £8 from Fife Employment Access Trust, The Stables, Falkland Estate, Falkland; Tel: 01337 858367.

Catering for young disabled people with complex needs

Many young adults with disabilities are experiencing a failure of the health and social services to meet their complex health and support needs, according to research carried out for the Joseph Rowntree Foundation.

The research was based on information gathered from six local authority social services departments, as well as interviews with the young people themselves.

It found that health and social services organisations often had inadequate and incomplete information about the numbers of young people with health and support needs. Young people often did not receive information that was important to them about medical conditions, treatments and impairments.

Some young people lose contact with specialist healthcare services when they cease to use paediatric services. In addition, young people who need high levels of support are at risk of moving into institutional accommodation as they reach adulthood.

The report points out that increasing numbers of young people with conditions associated with poor life expectancy, such as cystic fibrosis, are surviving into adulthood because of better quality care and more effective interventions. Yet planners have inadequate information because different agencies work with different definitions of disability and health needs. Registers of disabled children and adults often do not allow for the identification of those with multiple impairments or continuing healthcare needs.

Young people themselves wanted accessible ➤

information, given directly to them rather than to their parents. Peer support was important to them, particularly if they required ongoing treatment or if their condition was life-limiting, but this was not always available or recognised as important by service providers.

Some of the young people interviewed had been discriminated against in their access to education; and some were effectively being 'warehoused' in residential accommodation with little opportunity for making friends or doing anything meaningful during the day.

◆ **Hurling into a void: transition to adulthood for young people with complex health and support needs;** Jenny Morris; Joseph Rowntree Foundation; £16.95 from Pavilion Publishing, or from <http://www.jrf.org.uk/jrf.html>

Social factors important in targeting probation

Probation work with offenders to tackle social problems such as drug abuse may be helping them to avoid reoffending in the future. This is particularly evident for less experienced offenders and those with multiple problems.

The results of a large-scale British study of the link between social factors and reconviction confirm that an offender's criminal history is the most powerful predictor of future reconviction. However, social factors are also linked to the likelihood of reconviction: 71% of offenders with drug problems, for example, were reconvicted within two years, compared with 45% of other offenders.

Information about social factors linked to offending can help probation staff decide what advice to give to the court; how to work with

offenders; as well as helping to identify issues which can be tackled during supervision.

Problems such as poverty, unemployment and poor housing were linked to higher reconviction rates. The survey suggests, however, that possible links between alcohol problems and reconviction need further study.

The research, carried out for the Home Office, was based on information about 7,500 offenders supplied by six probation services. It looked at four types of sentences: probation, probation with requirements, community service and combination orders and found that offenders given probation with requirements were more likely and those on community service were the least likely to exhibit high-risk characteristics.

The study showed that social factors affected the choice of sentence for those given a community penalty. Consistent information could help to bring these factors to the attention of sentencers; could assist in focusing advice given to the courts in social enquiry reports and could help in targeting probation programmes.

The report concludes that reconviction prediction is a useful method of comparing the effectiveness of different sentences. For this reason, the collection of social data on prisoners should as far as possible be aligned with that collected for those serving community penalties.

◆ **The role of social factors in predicting reconviction for offenders on community penalties;** Chris May; Home Office Research Findings 97; 1999; Tel: 0171 273 2084; or download from www.homeoffice.gov.uk/rds/index.htm

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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