research in practice

The Tavistock and Portman NHS Foundation Trust

University of Sussex

Goldsmiths University of London

Practice Tool

PSDP–Resources and Tools:

Hearing from 'Annie': a parent who has experienced child protection involvement

Department for Education

Funded by the Department for Education

www.practice-supervisors.rip.org.uk

IN-TRAC

University of Bristol

GMSWA

South Yorkshire Teaching Partnership

D2N2 Teaching Partnership

UEA University of East Anglia

University of Birmingham

Northumbria University Newcastle

Introduction

This is the first of two linked learning tools which focus on the importance of social workers building collaborative and purposeful relationships with parents that enable their voices and views to be heard from the outset. It is written by 'Annie' who is a care-experienced birth mother with many years of experience of the child protection system in England.

The second learning tool takes up Annie's ideas and focuses on how practice supervisors can use her feedback to help practitioners ensure that the first visit with parents lays the foundations of a purposeful and collaborative relationship through which change can occur.

Annie is a pseudonym to protect her own identity and that of her children. She has experienced several sets of legal proceedings in respect of her children, including two sets of concurrent care proceedings and a new-born removal with an ultimate plan of adoption. Annie recognised the local authority's concerns and worked hard to overcome difficulties arising out of her own abusive childhood, poor relationship choices, domestic abuse, and mental health problems. She turned her life around and succeeded in bringing her new-born home. She then went on to write the 'Surviving Safeguarding: A Parent's Guide to the Child Protection Process' website, which supports parents to navigate the system and turn their own lives around.

This tool builds on some of Annie's written work, which she has published through blogs on her website. It focuses on issues of power and powerlessness and the importance of relationships with parents, drawing on her own experiences to do so. You will be asked to consider your responses to Annie's comments throughout.

As you read what Annie has written, it is useful to keep thinking about ways in which you can use your influence as a practice supervisor to positively affect practitioners to address the issues she raises. Over to Annie!

Practice supervisors are the invisible hand guiding practice

Please remember that you are the invisible guiding hand directing your team. What happens during supervision sessions often reflects what occurs in the interactions between workers and families in living rooms, in meetings, in conferences and, where necessary, in the family court, so this guiding hand truly is an important role.

As a practice supervisor you have power yourself, and you must hold and exercise that. Practice supervisors play a key role in ensuring that the staff they supervise work collaboratively with children and families. You are an important extension of the partnership between a worker and family, and you must never underestimate your impact. Paying attention to how a social worker communicates with family members at the first face-to-face meeting is crucial.

Power and powerlessness

Many parents, me included, highlight that their experience of working with social workers makes them feel powerless. In fact, I often talk about my relationship with the local authority as being one of the most emotionally damaging I've experienced. One of the reasons I was so motivated to write this learning tool was because of that power dynamic; being able to use my own experiences as a learning tool for social workers is an incredibly empowering feeling! In writing this, I'm hopeful that you can explore, without judgement, how you work with your own 'Annies' and their families, and how this could be improved if needs be.

The need to acknowledge power

The notion of power is a difficult one. As a parent who has had statutory involvement with social workers, it can very often feel like you don't have any! Powerlessness is a provocative feeling; it permeates every aspect of your interaction with the local authority. It can be transactional and affect the ability of everyone around the family to engage well, or at all, and this can be exacerbated if the involvement is not voluntary.

I personally have had experience of being 'done to' as a service user, and experience of being 'worked with', though unfortunately the former has been the dominant feeling throughout. However, this does put me in a strong position to be able to reflect on why the power dynamic between a social worker and their service users is so important to get right.

I will often refer to myself and others as 'service users'. This alone should elicit some further thinking for you all. I don't mind how I'm referred to; we are all users of services after all. But some people may feel this term alone dehumanises, distances and 'others' those you work with. So, something to bear in mind straightaway!

Over the years, I've trained social and: workers and I've come to learn that power is not a tool that many professionals feel comfortable with. It is a necessity, of course, but it is difficult as a human being to accept that you do hold power over another, particularly when the other person is vulnerable. Social work and social justice are inextricably linked with empowerment, so it is unsurprising that the polar opposite of this is a challenge to hold.

Activity

A note on power is one of the most read blogs on my website. It has promoted the most debate and discussion both online and in the training I have undertaken with social work students, experienced practitioners, senior management and practice supervisors. Please click on the link and read this blog.

Having done so, please reflect on the questions below and consider how you might ask these questions or talk about ideas in supervision discussions with team members.

Reflective questions for practice supervisors to consider:

How can social workers make parents feel like the working relationship is more balanced? What would need to happen to enable the parent to be more in control?

How might social workers wield the tool of power carefully? What do they need to consider in order to acknowledge their power with parents?

How might social workers have a conversation with parents about how to work in partnership to lessen the impact of a power imbalance?

Consider the notion of power within your organisation and how this may be reflected within your own practice as a supervisor. What could you do differently to ensure social workers themselves feel empowered?

Meeting parents for the first time

It is not our job as parents to come towards you. It is not our job to engage with you. We are not the professionals. Often you may read files which say, 'the family would not engage'. But, actually, the onus is on the worker to engage us, not the other way around.

It may very well be so that we need you, and we need help. But that's not an easy thing to admit to even ourselves, our family, or our friends. So if we put it in the context of admitting it to a stranger, who holds power, you can see how difficult that is.

It takes courage to ask for help, and even more to accept that you may have faults as a parent which have led to the need for that help to come from 'outside'.

Activity

I want to focus on the first meeting, the first time a social worker comes into your home and sits on your sofa. (I realise this isn't always how that first meeting happens, but however and wherever it does take place, the feelings do not change.)

This visit to a family provides an opportunity to set up the kind of working relationship in which both parent(s) and social worker can share their perspectives and work together to ensure that a child's needs are met. The first step in doing so is to reflect on what it feels like to have a social worker visit your family to discuss concerns about your child.

Reflective questions for practice supervisors to consider:

Think about how it might feel if you, as a parent, have asked the local authority for help with your family. Compare and contrast that with that 'knock on the door' – a sort of cross between a bailiff and the police knocking – and the appearance of a social worker coming into your life at a time of crisis, for whatever reason.

Forget the detail and the semantics; think about the feelings. It may seem somewhat obvious, but I'd like you to identify the feelings that you think may emerge if you were that parent and then allow yourself to feel them, too. How do you manage those feelings?

What do you need from the worker to help you to manage? If you felt disempowerment, how might a worker help you to feel more empowered, for example?

What can a worker to do engage with a family at the first visit?

Are these things practical or emotional?

What is the first question that a worker should be asking?

The need to acknowledge shame

Families' experiences of social workers will be rich and varied, positive and negative, helpful and unhelpful. Some families may have never had involvement, and their views on social workers may have been formed by reading the news or watching soap operas. The media is not often kind to the profession, and this will impact on any family's ability to trust what may or may not be happening.

Some families may have had previous good experiences, and so their expectations may be both high and possibly unrealistic. Some families may have had poor experiences and so their expectations are that this new and potentially unhelpful worker will simply aggravate them further.

A family's perception of what is happening may not be the 'reality'; they may be frightened and fear breeds mistrust, but it is their reality at this time. And regardless of why a parent has invited a social worker into their home, there will be painful and uncomfortable feelings of shame.

I have personally had first meetings with workers where they have not acknowledged my previous poor experiences with the local authority. I have also had first meetings with workers where they have told me they 'have not read any paperwork' because they 'wanted to hear it from me'. Neither approach is helpful.

Reflective questions for practice supervisors to consider:

If you do not acknowledge past experiences, good or bad, how do you know from the parent what worked well and what didn't?

Conversely, if you haven't taken the time to read up on the paperwork, is it then helpful to place an expectation on the parent to tell their whole story? Where would they need to begin and what is relevant? How does a worker navigate this?

As human beings, we are natural storytellers; how does a worker create a safe environment for service users to do this? And will this be a universal approach for each family?

The importance of relationships with parents

The bedrock of social work is relationships, and relationships are a two-way street. These are successfully built on mutual respect and understanding, empathy, humanity, care and kindness. But above all, it's about making a connection with those with whom you work.

I have spoken at many events and conferences over the years to a wide-ranging audience representing all aspects of social work, from the health, policing and education sectors, to family lawyers and the judiciary. All people. Just people. Because when you strip away the grand titles and important jobs, that's what we are. And the one connecting factor for everyone listening to my speeches is the power of vulnerability.

When I first began public speaking, I used to plaster myself in makeup and always wore the same (charity shop) posh dress and heels. It was a mask to shroud myself in, to hide the immense feelings of vulnerability that I experienced. I was telling my story and being honest about the impact of my abuse as a child, and in, turn my own failings as a mother. After some months of doing this, I started to feel able to connect with those who were listening to me. I would catch their eyes and I would no longer feel afraid. I had realised that those listening to my story were allowing themselves to be vulnerable by being in that moment with me. We laughed together, we cried together, I took them on a journey of my life and they allowed themselves to feel each step.

When you first come into a family's home and listen to their story, it's okay to well up. It's okay to feel pain and anguish for them. It's okay to hold their hands, should it feel right and welcomed. Authentic gestures are never worthless. However, it is not easy to be with someone and hold their pain. I often feel great sympathy for those working with families because I know that to listen to difficult experiences and stories repeatedly has a huge effect on the listener. I know from hearing from social workers themselves that this often means that professionals close themselves off to their own feelings and this can result in 'othering' that parent, making it difficult to connect. I think it's human nature to hold another person's pain at arm's length if you're able to. But I would encourage you wholeheartedly to allow yourself to feel some of it. By doing so, I would feel you understand me more, that your empathy is authentic and that you are genuinely there to help me.

Whilst you build relationships with your families using these tools of empathy, of real and genuine listening and of making connections, you must never lose sight of risk. A worker is there for a reason. To be purposeful, to be helpful, and to support a family out of a difficult situation or crisis into stability, self-sustainability and confident parenting. There is a risk of harm that has been identified, and this must be balanced alongside the building of a partnership. It cannot be forgotten, or put aside that children are abused, that children are harmed and that children are killed.

I have been in situations now as a consultant where a worker has over-identified with a service user and, as a result, lost the child's voice and lived experience. The child was not at immediate risk of harm, but harm was being done nonetheless. A gentle but firm reminder was needed and taken on board by the worker.

However, I have also had first-hand experience as a parent of, as Prof Brid Featherstone calls it, 'the risk monster' (Featherstone et al, 2018). Frightened, overzealous, or poorly-managed social workers undertaking assessments, gathering evidence, putting my family and I under surveillance without any real consideration of how the risks associated with my parenting (at the time) could be positively and proactively managed in partnership with the local authority.

Reflective questions for practice supervisors to consider:

How can a supervisor best support a worker to feel emotionally safe and resilient enough to withstand these feelings?

How can you encourage practitioners to connect and build the kind of relationships with parents where these feelings can be heard and acknowledged as part of the work?

The importance of offering hope

And what of hope? What about the capacity of families to make changes that will mean parents are 'good enough' and children can remain in their homes?

My local authority wrote me off. They did not think I was able to identify, make and sustain the changes I needed to make. But they missed a trick. Whilst they were so busy writing me off, they forgot they had a part to play, too. They had no hope, they had no trust in me. So, how on earth was a relationship to be built?

Hope is a powerful tool to have in your arsenal. Sometimes, service users and their families experience such difficult times that they themselves lose hope. They feel doomed, fatalistic. That life will never be easy, or that they will never be able to manage. I felt like that after my son's suicide in May 2017. The reason I did not give up was 'hope', given to me in abundance from those surrounding me.

Social workers, and those who support them, should never lose hope. You should never write people off or give up. You should always believe that things can get better. Sometimes they won't, and then difficult steps need to be taken. But sometimes, because you did not give up on them, a family will survive, and thrive.

You can read Annie's website and other articles she has written for Community Care and the Transparency Project via these links using the search function on both sites.

Author

Annie now acts as a consultant for many local authorities in England and trains social workers, students, family lawyers, the judiciary, the police, and health and education professionals, to support them to engage more effectively with families.

She sits on the Family Justice Council as the Parent's and Relatives Representative and is part of several working groups.

She is also a member of the Transparency Project, a legal education charity which aims to make family justice clearer. Annie lives in the North East with her children, her husband and a menagerie of pets.

Other ways you can use this tool

You could circulate what Annie has written to your team members. You might want to lead a group discussion with your team around the points Annie has made which directly relate to your organisation.

You could also set your team some reflective questions based on Annie's points in this tool for individual discussion within supervision, to use as a lens for a particular family you may be working with.

We want to hear more about your experiences of using PSDP resources and tools. Connect via Twitter using #PSDP to share your ideas and hear how other practice supervisors use the resources.

References

Featherstone B, Gupta A, Morris K M, Warner J (2016) 'Let's stop feeding the risk monster: towards a social model of "child protection"'. *Families, Relationships and Societies* 7 (1) 7-22 (16).

Practice Supervisor Development Programme
The Granary Dartington Hall
Totnes Devon TQ9 6EE

tel 01803 867692
email ask@rip.org.uk
@researchIP #PSDP

www.practice-supervisors.rip.org.uk

Author: Annie (Surviving Safeguarding) Parent Advocate, Author and Trainer.

Research in Practice is a programme of The Dartington Hall Trust which is a company limited by guarantee and a registered charity. Company No. 1485560 Charity No. 279756 VAT No. 402196875

Registered Office:
The Elmhirst Centre, Dartington Hall, Totnes TQ9 6EL