

## CoramBAAF Conversations | What is a sibling assessment? Transcript

00:00:01 Helen Little

Hi, my name is Helen Little. I am training, consulting and events manager at CoramBAAF and in this podcast we're talking to Joan Hunt, who's going to introduce in a minute. And we're going to talk about sibling assessments. Joan, do you want to just give us an introduction?

00:00:16 Joan Hunt

Hi, Helen and thank you. Yes, my name is Joan Hunt. I am a trainer, consultant for CoramBAAF.

00:00:23 Joan Hunt

Uhm, you may have read a lot about Joan Hunt in the past, and it's probably not me because she's done a lot of work on kinship care, so I'm just Joan, but I feel very strongly about sibling assessments. And so that's why I'm here today.

00:00:37 Helen Little

Thank you, Joan. Well, should we start at the very beginning then what are sibling assessments and why are they important?

00:00:42 Joan Hunt

So I think we really need to.

00:00:46 Joan Hunt

Think about the brother sister relationship at the very beginning of all of this. It's potentially the longest relationship that we're going to have, and it has it can have a real protective factor for people. It's also a real core part of our identity and the majority of the children who are in our care.

00:01:06 Joan Hunt

System is part of a site.

00:01:08 Joan Hunt

Group and so we need to understand this relationship. We need to understand it and importantly, we need to support it. So, the sibling assessment looks to understand the functioning of that sibling relationship. A lot of our children have experienced adversity.

00:01:29 Joan Hunt

And adversity, as we all know, uh, impacts on our development and childhood development and more importantly the sibling relationship is part of that development process.

00:01:39 Joan Hunt

Yes. And so those adversities, adversities, and the trauma can really impact on that sibling relationship. So, the sibling assessment looks to.

00:01:52 Joan Hunt

Look at how does this sibling sibling group function? How do they function? How how you know what makes them tick, what? But more importantly, within that is what are the individual

experiences of the children within that sibling group? They're not a homogeneous group, you know. Any one of us who is a.

00:02:10

Umm.

00:02:12 Joan Hunt

Is a brother or a sister? Knows that we're all individuals within that group and how we feel and think about that are all very individual to us, you know? So that's really important. And the sibling assessment provides us with a tool to be able to look at what those factors are.

00:02:32 Joan Hunt

And how how you know how these children actually tick with each other. And that is the that is the bare bones of what we are looking at here we're you know and I think that in the past they've been plagued with.

00:02:47 Joan Hunt

Lots of lots of anomalies and lots of variables because there are so many variables that can impact upon a sibling relationship that we can get lost in all of those and it makes it kind of a quagmire to get through. And so the initial response from a lot of social workers is that they don't want to do them.

00:03:10 Joan Hunt

Because they are they can appear really, really complex as to what's going on with them. So as a social worker, I'm looking at doing a sibling assessment.

00:03:24 Joan Hunt

To see how the children function to see how the impact of their past has impacted upon them. And then once that is done then we can start a care planning process, but only when we've we've actually done this sibling assessment.

00:03:44 Helen Little

One of social workers than in the past, Joan rather, because we're talking about sibling assessment reports that.

00:03:50 Helen Little

Key to this, So what have they done?

00:03:52 Helen Little

In the past or.

00:03:52 Joan Hunt

So in the past and and and like a lot of social work training that.

00:03:56 Joan Hunt

Is.

00:03:56 Joan Hunt

That has happened. It's you.

00:03:59 Joan Hunt

You are asked to do a.

00:04:00 Joan Hunt

Court. OK. And and you say I've never done one of these before and so somebody provides you with one that was done earlier, right? And so you are already in a very vulnerable situation here because you're reading another report on another family who have got completely different variables than the family that you were working with.

00:04:08

Aye, aye.

00:04:22 Joan Hunt

The reports in the past were often written from very single voice, so the voice of the of the social worker who will have worked with the children as well, so their voice will be there. But it's very much that that's being reported.

00:04:41 Joan Hunt

And it's reported on the elements that that workers.

00:04:44 Joan Hunt

Sees as significant.

00:04:47 Joan Hunt

Because there's so many variables, we have a problem because you can end up going down variables that really are not going to provide you with any clarity as to what's actually going on here. It also means is that there is no standard across the profession as to what is expected.

00:05:06 Joan Hunt

And what it should?

00:05:07 Joan Hunt

Look like. So this means that courts and families and anybody accessing their files.

00:05:14 Joan Hunt

Those are going to be seeing things that can be very, very different across the board simply because it's coming down to an author within the report. So what we have here with the SAR report, the sibling assessment report by quorum by.

00:05:34 Joan Hunt

Which for me is is the best thing ever as a social worker. For me it is because it's the core to everything that we are doing for our people.

00:05:45

Hmm.

00:05:46 Joan Hunt

And it provides A framework that keeps me from going down rabbit holes and I can go down the rabbit hole like the best of them from doing that.

00:05:57

Hmm.

00:05:57 Joan Hunt

And the most important thing is that it's multidisciplinary multi voice to it and that multi voice is the family are very much included within this.

00:06:02

Right.

00:06:11 Joan Hunt

Foster carers, if we've got foster carers, we're including them in that voice. We're including the school or education. We're including our contact workers. If we've got them involved. We're also including health in that and anybody else who's who's important and relevant to these children's voices coming into this.

00:06:33

Hmm.

00:06:33 Joan Hunt

That's being used by.

00:06:36 Joan Hunt

Observation forms that are passed out to people and filled in so that we have a huge breadth of knowledge coming in to inform what's actually going here.

00:06:49 Joan Hunt

That provides clarity and transparency for everybody involved, so it's never just one person's perspective, which I'm not saying that that's what social workers would do. But that was a danger that could easily happened within these assessments. The other thing that it brings to it.

00:07:08 Joan Hunt

Is a real fair.

00:07:09 Joan Hunt

Yes.

00:07:10 Joan Hunt

For the children, it's also a historical document, so these documents can be on file for those in care for 75 years, they can be they will be on file for 100 years. For people who are adopted so.

00:07:30 Joan Hunt

Generations from now, they're going to be able to come back and see clearly who was involved in these discussions, what everybody said.

00:07:39 Joan Hunt

You know why decisions were being made the way that they were being made, and importantly, what the children said because the children's voice is also very much a mainstream throughout these assessments. What is it that they want from these assessments?

00:07:54 Helen Little

That must bring into the the fact they're held on record for so long, and they obviously can then be accessed by.

00:07:59 Helen Little

Children in the future, when they're looking back on the road, that must place a whole whole other layer of complexity and responsibility to those writing it.

00:08:08 Joan Hunt

Surely. Absolutely. Absolutely. And I think back on reports that maybe I wrote 30 years ago, they have, they stayed that have they stayed the test of.

00:08:14

Hmm.

00:08:18 Joan Hunt

Time and I'm not sure you know because and when you are looking at a sibling assessment where there are so many complexities involved having the voice of all these other professionals within it is what I would rather be presenting to to those children so that they.

00:08:38 Joan Hunt

Absolutely understand what's going on here.

00:08:41 Helen Little

But I suppose also if because this sibling bond is so special, isn't it? Whether you, you know whether you fight with your brothers and sisters or whether you actually love each other. I guess in looking back in years to come at these record.

00:08:54 Helen Little

What would you'd want to know and also be being mellow with age? So we, you know, but. But looking back at those reports, you know, in times to come, you'd want to know that that special sibling relationship was actually taken into seriously take into consideration, wouldn't you? And that decisions were made and you agree with that.

00:09:14 Helen Little

Decision.

00:09:15 Helen Little

With that hindsight view, as an adult, wouldn't you, did you say to me?

00:09:20 Joan Hunt

Yeah, I think that, I mean whether or not.

00:09:24 Joan Hunt

These decisions are difficult, so we're talking about decisions once it comes to we've got the sibling assessment. What is the care plan and and what's the permanency option because for all children, that's what we are wanting is the permanency that that's the element within us that gives us a sense of belonging.

00:09:26 Helen Little

No.

00:09:32

Hmm.

00:09:44 Joan Hunt

And helps us sort of achieve you know our you know.

00:09:50 Joan Hunt

Helps us achieve what we can achieve throughout our lives so.

00:09:54

Hmm.

00:09:56 Joan Hunt

The sibling assessment when when we're when we're looking at it. I'm also wanting to see evidence.

00:10:03 Joan Hunt

Of if this wasn't, if this sibling relationship was fraught with difficulties and complexities.

00:10:11 Joan Hunt

What did those?

00:10:12 Joan Hunt

Workers and professionals do to support that.

00:10:16 Joan Hunt

OK, so how how how was that supported within it and and importantly, within our legislation, we have to consider the lifelong implications, not just the young persons 18 but the lifelong implications of them being part of a family or not being a part of the family and what that actually means.

00:10:37 Joan Hunt

I think in today's world we really have had a refocus both within the legal framework that our government framework and our care framework of refocusing back on, OK, this is a this is a really.

00:10:57 Joan Hunt

Important element of somebody's life. What are we doing about it? What's our responsibility about it? Though it may be at the end of a sibling assessment, we're using that information to support our our parents with their child. We haven't done any removal.

00:11:16 Joan Hunt

Maybe we're using it to inform them about this is how your siblings are functioning and this kind of needs to, you know, we need to be putting into place to help support them. It may be that children are going to be removed from care. So how are we supporting and informing kinship carers, foster carers, people you know about these children specifically?

00:11:37 Joan Hunt

So that so that we have as best a chance as possible them together, if we keep them together, how do we keep enhancing that relationship?

00:11:48 Joan Hunt

And those are the things and how do?

00:11:50 Joan Hunt

We support them.

00:11:51 Joan Hunt

So, so we don't want to come up with the care plan first. We want to do the assessment first, see what, see what's there that informs what we're going to be doing you.

00:12:03 Helen Little

Mentioned unfairness earlier on. Is that part of what you were talking about in terms of it being a fair, fairer process or a fairer assessment?

00:12:10 Joan Hunt

Yeah. Yeah. So because you're because you're using different perspectives, right? So it's not a single perspective that's coming back at you. We can look at any sort of historical document.

00:12:25 Joan Hunt

And if I was going to say the history, a reader, a, a book about the history of the world from at on the year 2020, and it was written by Donald Trump.

00:12:39 Joan Hunt

His perspective is valid to a huge number of people, but it's not the only perspective that's there and so therefore, in order for it to be fair, it has to have a wider perspective and narrative coming into it. So I'm seeing it from all these different angles. That's kind of coming in here and therefore it provides that.

00:12:52

Yes.

00:13:00 Joan Hunt

There.

00:13:01 Joan Hunt

That that balance sheet, that's kind of going, does that does that sense. So just that you know somebody coming along and ohh I saw the children at school and I saw the children here and I saw the children there and I spoke to the children. It's what do you see the children doing and what do you see the children doing and really highlighting that?

00:13:05 Helen Little

Yeah, yeah, yeah.

00:13:22 Joan Hunt

As being what's going on here.

00:13:25 Helen Little

It sounds like and and I don't wish to be negative, but it sounds like it's obviously very detailed, but it actually sounds and use I think use the word complex, but use it in a in a positive way. Being complex and wide-ranging, but for a social worker that must just be ohh my goodness, this is gonna take me forever. This is like.

00:13:45 Helen Little

A lot of writing up. There's a lot of talking to people. It's a lot of time spent with a lot of people and for a busy social worker, how? How, what would you say about?

00:13:54 Helen Little

Well, I'll say to that.

00:13:55 Joan Hunt

I would say the genius about about the SAR report is the supporting letters that go out, the observation forms that go out. So those are being handed to family members and maybe you're having somebody support them and filling it out. So it might be a family worker would support them.

00:14:03

Right.

00:14:16 Joan Hunt

Same with the fostering work of the foster carer, the supervising social worker could support them in it. You've got school, you've got education. They're filling out the documents.

00:14:28 Joan Hunt

And then you're bringing it back. And I always sort of say to people what's what's really useful is to have, like, a small core group looking at that information coming back, you know, somebody from your permanency team, your manager and yourself looking at it and sort of saying, OK, what is all of this sort of telling us and what's going on?



00:14:50 Joan Hunt

What this does is it leaves the social worker to do a really important task. The most important task within this, which is the direct work with the children and young people, is that has been because in the past people have gone to wanted to see the children in all these different environments and children.

00:15:00 Helen Little

Right, yeah.

00:15:10 Joan Hunt

Oh.

00:15:10 Joan Hunt

Respond normally when you're there anyway, do they you.

00:15:14 Joan Hunt

Walk in and.

00:15:14

Yep.

00:15:14 Joan Hunt

They're like, what are you doing here and what's going? It's absolutely of no use nor ornament. Quite often seeing it. But what this does is that this anchors me in the children's perspective, and I can spend time doing what I need to do in order to show that so I can show.

00:15:32 Joan Hunt

The individual lived experience of each of these children. What is the combined elements of this sibling group? What are the different dyads within this group? And it's me doing the direct work that's getting that voice of the child in as to what's going on.

00:15:50 Joan Hunt

So that that obviously is a huge part of what we're doing here, but quite often maybe gets minimised, you know.

00:16:01 Helen Little

It sounds it sounds like that might be the. Yeah, sounds like that might be the.

00:16:02 Joan Hunt

Work.

00:16:04 Helen Little

Sun bit it's.

00:16:05

Always.

00:16:06 Joan Hunt

A bit sometimes. Sometimes it's the it's the.

00:16:09 Joan Hunt

It's very emotional.

00:16:10 Joan Hunt

Work and I think that you have to.

00:16:14 Joan Hunt

Have a a level of experience and also about being able to be regulated yourself because it can be very emotional. Some of the work that we do, especially with our children, you know, so yeah, but it can be fun.

00:16:30 Helen Little

So so have you seen the big difference that it makes? Have you seen this?

00:16:34 Helen Little

The before and after with using the siblings report and before and after and some really practical examples.

00:16:38 Joan Hunt

Well, the feedback from everybody, the feedback from courts and from agencies.

00:16:44 Joan Hunt

Has been the continuity and and that all of a sudden people can read it and we know what we're looking for. And we also know what was involved in collating this information. And so therefore I'm not having to.

00:17:01 Joan Hunt

I'm not having to read through it myself. OK, so everything is really well and clearly set out.

00:17:05 Helen Little

Yeah.

00:17:08 Joan Hunt

That by the time you come to the analysis of this information, it flows really well, so you're not getting, you're not getting lost in in all of it because it is. It's really easy to get lost in all this information. But this it keeps it concise and crisp and that's the way that I like an assessment.

00:17:29 Joan Hunt

Yeah, assessments can if you're not careful.

00:17:32 Joan Hunt

And get really rambly or they can be missing the whole point.

00:17:38 Helen Little

Yeah. And I guess that that, that the whole focus on the child and on the children within that sibling group actually gives the whole report a focus, doesn't it? And you know what you're looking at and it's a you're pulling it all together, as you said, which must mean that it must be quite satisfying to put together if you that you know that you've put them together actually is a well-rounded.

00:17:59 Helen Little

360 view of.

00:18:01 Helen Little

What the children want, but also what is right for them, I guess, is that.

00:18:06 Helen Little

Balance is it?

00:18:07 Joan Hunt

It's always a balance shape. Wait, we're not going to get the perfect scenario. The perfect scenario would be that the children are at home and everything is going great.

00:18:19 Joan Hunt

For us to have to make decisions about care, planning about, you know, if you've got a large sibling group trying to find a a family who will take in six children is a tough ask. So we inevitably end up in a situation where are we going to have to separate?

00:18:37 Joan Hunt

Their siblings.

00:18:39 Joan Hunt

So what I want to achieve is the least wrong answer. It's not going to be a perfect answer. It's going to be the least wrong answer and it's going to have really clear reasons as to why this decision was made. But anybody looking back on it, they might not.

00:18:45

No.

00:18:59 Joan Hunt

Agree with it, or they may agree with it.

00:19:03 Joan Hunt

But at least they understand the reasoning.

00:19:06

Hmm.

00:19:07 Joan Hunt

And like I said before, because you've used these different perspectives and the big part of it has been on the the voice of the child.

00:19:14 Joan Hunt

Were we anchored in that transparency. This is. This is kind of what what?

00:19:20 Joan Hunt

We were working.

00:19:21 Helen Little

And does the work in this assessment and this real focus on the child and on the siblings and on their relationship and the importance of that relationship, does that then impact on the keeping them in touch afterwards? Is that helpful in that do?

00:19:39 Joan Hunt

You think absolutely it's.

00:19:40 Joan Hunt

It's a core element of it.

00:19:42 Joan Hunt

Because.

00:19:43 Joan Hunt

You may not be able to be in a position where you can live together. That doesn't mean you don't have a relationship. No, you will always have a relationship and it's our focus is to bring that back into the fore and make sure that that relationship is supported. And let's face it, anybody who's part of a sibling group, you know, I'm sure that there were times.

00:20:04 Joan Hunt

When you know you'd get together and it wasn't great, and it, you know, and your fault and stuff happened. But you know, that doesn't mean that that it's not worth investing in.

00:20:15 Joan Hunt

Doesn't mean that it can't change. It's got real potential to change over real time. How we think about brothers and sisters and adulthood is very different than when we were children. And that's a natural developmental process that we go through. But there's still very core to who you are, the one.

00:20:35 Joan Hunt

Thing we can do to a child is not tell them of an existence of a brother or a sister their adulthood.

00:20:42 Joan Hunt

You know, it's absolutely terrible to find out that information.

00:20:43 Helen Little

Yeah.

00:20:48 Helen Little

Because about everything else that that you know, they have shared experience, both the dreadful that was they have shared experience and actually.

00:20:56 Helen Little

Nobody else has that experience like their brothers and you know, other than a brother or sister or sibling in some way, do they they have. That's what sort of they understand each other. You know those ticks and whatever and or quirky things are about you. That's because that's where that came from. You know, my mum used to do that. My dad used that whatever it might be, isn't it? And that sort of gives you a sense of.

00:21:11 Joan Hunt

Yeah.

00:21:17 Helen Little

Grounding and belonging, I guess to something, even if it's not in.

00:21:19

David.

00:21:20 Helen Little

That able to be in that family relationship.

00:21:23 Joan Hunt

It's that sibling identity, that familial identity, that kind of comes with it, and you may go into a a new family. You may go into a foster family, an adoptive family, a kinship family.

00:21:25

Yeah.

00:21:40 Joan Hunt

And.

00:21:41 Joan Hunt

You will want a sense of belonging there, but that doesn't mean you don't have a sense of belonging with this. With this other family, this family we, whether you know that, that will be a part of you as an adult, whether or not you choose to continue a relationship is a choice.

00:21:46 Helen Little

No.

00:21:49 Helen Little

Yeah, yeah.

00:21:59 Joan Hunt

When it's been foisted on you as a child, there's no choice involved and that's that's the the difficulty. They really want to promote contact. We want to promote contact between siblings.

00:22:06 Helen Little

Difficult, yeah.

00:22:13 Joan Hunt

You know, whether they're an adoptive placement and a foster placement, they're in a kinship placement and a foster. It doesn't matter. We want that contact to happen it that's not always possible. And that is a place for us to kind of up our game in the practise of.

00:22:19

Hmm.

00:22:33 Joan Hunt

How we support families and children within this?

00:22:36 Helen Little

Umm, lovely John. Would there be any final thoughts for anyone undertaking a this obviously really important assessment that you would want them to take away.

00:22:46 Joan Hunt

Use the SAR them on the training and use it because it will change how you do it and the most important thing for workers is that by following the SAR report and the the.

00:23:02 Joan Hunt

The framework you're going to be doing less work, not more work, and for any worker that should be the biggest selling thing to add. All if you follow this, it will write all your other reports after this. So for me that's a win.

00:23:16 Helen Little

When that sounds like a win win for anybody, isn't it? You know, they'll save you less. Not, not often. People say this will save you.

00:23:23 Helen Little

Save you work be.

00:23:23 Helen Little

Less work I'm actually. I'm actually that sounds like more effective at the same time. Yeah. You know, best decisions better. Potential futures. Better start. OK. Yeah. Jen, thank you so much. John has mentioned the fact you've mentioned the fact that.

00:23:28 Joan Hunt

Yes, absolutely.

00:23:38 Helen Little

Current background training we do and this is our plug. So the next one is the on the 24th of of April.

00:23:45 Helen Little

If you have well, any more information about this, contact me at Coram. Bass or contact us via the website and we look forward to seeing you on one of our training soon. But equally, any questions please come back to us. Jen, thank you ever so much. Been really interesting chatting to you this afternoon and thank you.

00:24:03 Joan Hunt

And thank you, Helen. Take Care now, OK.

00:24:05 Helen Little

Thank you. Bye.