

CoramBAAF Conversations | Managing allegations, concerns and complaints against foster carers transcript

00:00:00 Jo Francis

Hello to everyone listening. I'm Jo Francis, CoramBAAF's publishing manager. And today I'm talking to Laura Williams about her new practice guide, managing allegations, concerns and complaints in foster care.

00:00:14 Jo Francis

This is a new book in popular Good Practice Guide series. Laura has had a long career in social work, most recently at the London Borough of Southwark, and she also does some training for combat.

00:00:27 Jo Francis

So Laura, thanks for joining us. Your new book is aimed at social workers and it's about managing allegations, concerns and complaints. So what are the most important things for social worker to bear in mind when they first start having to deal with an allegation or a concern or a complaint? Are there certain things that you would say that they should do or not?

00:00:49 Jo Francis

Thing that happens.

00:00:51 Laura Williams

Well, for me the number one thing would be first of.

00:00:55 Laura Williams

All don't panic.

00:01:00 Jo Francis

Always a good idea.

00:01:02 Laura Williams

No, no, but it is scary. It's a very scary process. No, but try to maintain an open mind and it's really important to keep relevant managers informed and updated about what's going on. Yeah. Ensure that the.

00:01:22 Laura Williams

Inquiries occurred out thoroughly. Say goodbye.

00:01:28 Laura Williams

And don't forget to and this is part of keeping an open mind, so kindness and respect to the parents, even though you're.

00:01:37 Jo Francis

Of course, yeah.

00:01:39 Laura Williams

In that position.

00:01:39 Laura Williams

That you don't know whether the allegation is true or not.

00:01:44 Laura Williams

But you're still still appreciated. Appreciate the updated told what's happening and having someone reach out to them and showing concern.

00:01:59 Laura Williams

And as I say, it's important not to deal with any of these situations alone. Really important to seek help and support yourself with the social worker. And remember to put these in place with with the parents.

00:02:13 Jo Francis

And of course you. I mean, none of you are working alone, really, are you?

00:02:17 Laura Williams

No, it's no. And that's one of the strengths is that if people come together and share information, you often get a richer and more complete picture of what's what's been going on. And it makes it easier to judge.

00:02:33 Laura Williams

The level of risk and what and to evaluate, what needs to be done next and sharing information and planning together is a really important aspect of this. Responding to allegations and concerns.

00:02:48 Jo Francis

You know, I can say, well, I mean, of course I'd imagine the the best thing is is not to have an allegation happen.

00:02:54 Jo Francis

In the first place.

00:02:57 Jo Francis

That, that wishful thinking there. And I know your book. It's. I mean, obviously it's about following the regulations and doing what's necessary when there is an allegation. But it also looks at the, the, the.

00:03:08 Jo Francis

Culture, I suppose, and ways of working in fostering.

00:03:11 Jo Francis

Service where you could maybe help to avoid allegations happening in the 1st place as much as possible. Anyway, what would you suggest fostering services continue to help avoid allegations?

00:03:27 Laura Williams

Well, I guess the most obvious thing is ensuring through the recruitment and assessment process that people who are not suitable to Foster and not, yeah. And that involves.

00:03:47 Laura Williams

Assessing social workers and their managers, families being offices, all playing a part in ridiculously checking the information that's being obtained and ensuring that.

00:04:03 Laura Williams

It's component. There are many gaps.

00:04:07 Laura Williams

And any concerns are properly followed out yet.

00:04:10 Jo Francis

Right.

00:04:14 Laura Williams

There's very few applicants who got the wrong motivation for to Foster our identified and eliminated some things before they they get into position where they can.

00:04:33 Laura Williams

These children. But your parents have become a fool.

00:04:34 Jo Francis

Of course.

00:04:41 Laura Williams

Was cleaned up improperly. Help them understand what's acceptable to them and speak to her about what support and training will be available to them.

00:04:58 Laura Williams

Is that?

00:05:02 Laura Williams

That's the parents.

00:05:04 Laura Williams

Care for children 24 hours a day in their own home and some children who suffered extreme from animal abuse in particular needs and challenges into the this the home parents have to deal with, yeah.

00:05:17 Jo Francis

Of course.

00:05:20 Laura Williams

And what the research tells us is that the.

00:05:26 Laura Williams

But most theoretical allegations are not about the predatory type of abuses. The results and carers responding inappropriately to children's difficult behaviour.

00:05:36 Jo Francis

Lawyers to say.

00:05:38 Laura Williams

But that is partly explained that that, that.

00:05:48 Laura Williams

A History Network survey found in 2019 found that half of all foster parents were caring for children and young people who had contacts and mental health problems, compared with only 11% in the general population that included children.

00:06:06 Jo Francis

Thank you.

00:06:07 Laura Williams

The the post violence itself pound you're missing, or you're involved in the police. Yeah, and we don't always recognise the effects of.

00:06:21 Laura Williams

Burnout and compassion fatigue. Parents in the same way that we might recognise it in other caring professions such as nursing or firefighting or social work, and that research tells us that, you know, people are overwhelmed.

00:06:23 Jo Francis

Of course.

00:06:41 Laura Williams

And by stress and anxiety, they become numb and switched off, and health suffers, and they may behave out of character because their tolerance levels have been.

00:06:54 Laura Williams

Reached through, it's important to remember that that's an element of this stream, that this skin for stream and that.

00:07:05 Laura Williams

The agency's social workers and managers do have a duty to.

00:07:13 Laura Williams

Provide this carries with all the resources and support that they need to fulfil that really important task of caring for children who are hurting and need more than ordinary parenting.

00:07:29 Laura Williams

And and that they're not left to deal with those situations alone, they'll be the brakes and caring if they, if they need them. So that does link to the sort of cultural resources. Plus there are important practical measures which.

00:07:48 Laura Williams

Can help to avoid the mistaken allegations.

00:07:53 Laura Williams

For example, making sure that the parents are given enough background information about the child and their their difficulties.

00:08:05 Laura Williams

Providing a risk assessment for each child in an up-to-date safe care plan and another area is is training for the care has been therapeutic parenting techniques which.

00:08:11 Jo Francis

Right, yeah.

00:08:18 Laura Williams

Can help them feel more confident in managing behaviour which is confusing or or upsetting and this can help them understand the meaning behind the child's behaviour.

00:08:33 Laura Williams

So that they don't take it so personally or get into difficult power struggles when they're able to step back if the child is acting hours or being in.

00:08:44 Laura Williams

That behaving in a in a destructive way.

00:08:52 Laura Williams

They they also know how to get how to get help and how to deescalate situations with young people. So.

00:08:59 Laura Williams

There's a there's a. There's a whole holistic approach really to supporting.

00:09:04 Laura Williams

That's the placements that Mister Carrot is in the heart of services to look after children. Mr Carriers need the highest levels of support and supervision and training in order to give that to the to the very ground of the children that they're caring for.

00:09:24 Jo Francis

I can see that there's there's a lot of areas there that fostering services, they they can actually address that's that's very useful. And from what you've said, I mean, relationships are really key here and I would imagine if your social worker and an allegation or concern or complaint has come up then relationships.

00:09:44 Jo Francis

And really become quite strained between social workers and the foster carers. So what advice would you have for social workers in those sorts of situations? I mean, how, how can they maintain good working relationships with the foster carer when there's an allegation and you know it's being looked into?

00:10:04 Laura Williams

Yeah, that's a very good point. I think the most obvious thing is for social workers from the outset to try and build an honest relationship with carers, being clear about their role, if an allegation is made.

00:10:24 Laura Williams

And getting to know the fostering family really well, including seeing other members of the household on visit.

00:10:33 Laura Williams

To get a feel of how the child relates to the family, who they go to, their distressed, how the family will, you know, relate and respond to the child already got the knowledge and understanding of the community.

00:10:49 Laura Williams

And what can you say help you to?

00:10:54 Laura Williams

To keep the wealth of philosophies would be something that doesn't seem right.

00:10:59 Laura Williams

You can follow that up and ask more questions or.

00:11:06 Laura Williams

You start to notice something that.

00:11:10 Laura Williams

Is unexpected. It gives you the chance to follow. Follow those. Those those are, I think the other things that foster care is often report being abandoned by the frustrating service and navigation happens. And although the social work has to be.

00:11:29 Laura Williams

Remain neutral about the allegation while it's under the investigation.

00:11:35 Laura Williams

They can still show concern and compassion.

00:11:38 Laura Williams

And make sure that there has other sources of advice and support, for example from from Question Network and I'm just checking in regularly checking how they are or even they can't tell them very much. It's really important that doesn't suddenly feel left.

00:11:59 Laura Williams

Getting notifications.

00:12:02 Laura Williams

It can also.

00:12:04 Laura Williams

Help to mitigate the financial impact of an investigation with the carrier get is receiving some sort of financial attainment during the investigation. In the same way that the number of staff in suspension would continue to be paid for.

00:12:21 Laura Williams

There's always ways of.

00:12:24 Laura Williams

UM.

00:12:26 Laura Williams

Maintaining some sort of relationship with the Mr Care, even though it's being tested and it's important to be honest that it it isn't easy on either side when that happened.

00:12:41 Jo Francis

Yes, I I can imagine you.

00:12:44 Jo Francis

Can you can still listen?

00:12:45 Jo Francis

To the foster carer, can't you?

00:12:47 Jo Francis

You can you can.

00:12:48 Jo Francis

Kind of be there and.

00:12:49 Jo Francis

I mean, did did. Have you got more to say about the importance of listening to?

00:12:53 Jo Francis

To the foster carer to to children in placement.

00:12:57 Laura Williams

There has to be a difference between listening as part of the investigation process. You're asking for the Mr cancellation of events or the child's version of events.

00:13:12 Jo Francis

Right.

00:13:12 Laura Williams

In normal supervisory relationships, though, it's important for social workers to stop and ask the carer about how they're feeling.

00:13:25 Laura Williams

But if there's anything they're finding difficult, yeah. And rather than come up with lots of solutions, just let the parent talk and let the story unfold. Because sometimes caring for a child with certain difficulties may trigger.

00:13:45 Laura Williams

Some difficult memories or experiences in the first part from their own lives to understanding that might help make sense of why the postal carrier is perhaps.

00:13:58 Laura Williams

Being more punitive towards the child or or isn't coping well, so there are times when you have to be solution focused. In our times when it's more important to build a picture and get it, gain a deeper understanding of what's what's actually going on below.

00:14:19 Laura Williams

The surface.

00:14:21 Jo Francis

The story be held behind the headlines, isn't it? Yeah.

00:14:22 Laura Williams

You can understand the meaning.

00:14:24 Laura Williams

For what?

00:14:27 Laura Williams

And the same children. So children have different ways of expressing what's going on for them.

00:14:35 Laura Williams

And they don't always have accurate language.

00:14:39 Laura Williams

So again, spending time with children and engaging with them in an age appropriate way in a way that fits with their communication style and using whatever tools we need to.

00:14:56 Laura Williams

To communicate with that particular child, it's 2 messages it gives the child the message that what they have to say is important and that you do care about what.

00:15:07 Laura Williams

What they're telling you?

00:15:08 Laura Williams

And it's important to have the child's voice when you're looking at the bigger picture and put that into the.

00:15:16 Laura Williams

Context of the child's background and experiences.

00:15:20 Laura Williams

Super Child has made an allegation and they've made previous allegations. The meaning given to that would be different for another case or the child is having a loss of contact with their parents.

00:15:35 Laura Williams

They may feel that making that allegation will pace in their return to their family. They have been encouraged to make an allegation by family members so hearing from the child and the career and all all parties involved does help us to piece together all the relevant pieces of information.

00:15:55 Laura Williams

And to form a much more accurate view of what Nice and preformed.

00:15:59 Laura Williams

And but again, we have to say you guys are.

00:16:04 Laura Williams

Assessments in the lighting.

00:16:06 Laura Williams

Other information that emerges.

00:16:10 Jo Francis

There's there's a lot to these things, isn't there? And you can see that there's there's all sorts of reasons, all sorts of possibilities. Well, of course, we know from from the book that the the majority of allegations are unsubstantiated and foster carers. They do continue working in fostering services and.

00:16:28 Jo Francis

Of course, there may well have been quite strained relationships while allegations were being investigated. And So what about the aftermath? You're you're a social worker. There's been an allegation, it's unsubstantiated. How can you help to restore those relationships after the case?

00:16:52 Laura Williams

I think that there's helpful things is to hold some sort of deep briefing meeting as soon as possible after an investigation has been concluded, because that allows everyone to express help how the investigation.

00:17:06 Jo Francis

Right.

00:17:12 Laura Williams

Affected them and how they're feeling now. Yeah and.

00:17:19 Laura Williams

It may.

00:17:19 Laura Williams

Be an opportunity.

00:17:21 Laura Williams

For everybody to reflect on what has been learnt.

00:17:28 Laura Williams

What could have been done differently?

00:17:32 Laura Williams

But also to think about, think ahead for the future and how.

00:17:37 Laura Williams

Everyone can move through positively.

00:17:41 Laura Williams

And it may mean acknowledging that.

00:17:44 Laura Williams

In a particular relationship, has become, so scaling, but it might be more helpful to have a change of social work if it's something change of team, but hopefully it doesn't need to come to that. If everyone is approaches the meeting with.

00:18:06 Laura Williams

Commitment to try and move forward, but again with the parents, we need that space to express. Just have read through the whole experience was having children suddenly removed being packed and.

00:18:24 Laura Williams

And relationships and many marriages.

00:18:28 Laura Williams

Focus on destroying. Yeah, families often put pressure on the best case to resign. You got lots of lots of fallout from families and there's an allegation regardless of whether it's later found to be unfounded. So.

00:18:49 Laura Williams

That is.

00:18:51 Laura Williams

Need often for some sort of.

00:18:54 Laura Williams

In poetry and healing work to take place, sometimes it can. It may need some external help, but generally.

00:19:07 Laura Williams

The service.

00:19:08 Laura Williams

And and should attempt to rebuild those relationships and that trust relation.

00:19:17 Jo Francis

And I can see that it's again. You know, it comes down to to relationships and listening and ensuring that everyone feels heard, doesn't it? Yeah.

00:19:27 Laura Williams

Yes, absolutely.

00:19:29 Jo Francis

Yeah. Wow. Well, thank you very much, Laura. That's that's some fascinating practise points there. I mean, have you, have you got any sort of any final points for clustering social workers out there who are having to deal with this subject in any final message for them?

00:19:50 Laura Williams

Actually, the book of course.

00:19:55 Laura Williams

Is not goes back to.

00:19:58 Laura Williams

Much of this is to do with relationships. Getting to know fostering families well, but maintaining that professional boundaries so that we can still.

00:20:10 Laura Williams

And alert to signs that something may be wrong.

00:20:14 Laura Williams

And balancing the right amount of support with challenge and ensuring the seculars have all the skills and support they need, as well as opportunities for breaks them when they need them.

00:20:29 Laura Williams

We're looking out for signs of stress or burning.

00:20:34 Laura Williams

Just getting to know the children in the place and and make sure you pay attention the the social workers. Make sure you pay attention to your own learning and development. Yeah, use your own supervision, your colleagues to help you reflect on what's happening and how you're feeling.

00:20:53 Laura Williams

And obviously make sure you are familiar with the standards and regulations.

00:20:59 Jo Francis

Ohh, thank you very much. That's fascinating to hear your insights in that. I mean it's obviously it's a wide-ranging, it's a very complex subject and thank you very much for writing the book. We hope that it will be a lot of help to a lot of social workers out there.

00:21:18 Jo Francis

To a lot of our Members.

00:21:19 Jo Francis

And thank you for talking to me today.

00:21:22 Laura Williams

Thank you. I hope it's been helpful and I hope the book does give some pointers and make the journey a little bit easier.

00:21:33 Jo Francis

Thank you very much.