

Learning from 40 years of experience - key issues for the Care Review

at the CoramBAAF 40th Anniversary Reception, 14 December 2020

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The 40th anniversary of BAAF, now CoramBAAF, has provided a significant opportunity to explore the multiple lessons from 40 years of experience. I want to acknowledge and indeed celebrate the contribution of a wide range of practitioners, managers, policy-makers and legislators in social work, health and the law, as well as researchers and academics, to these 40 years. This has provided us with a rich source of insight, expertise and knowledge, and I typically come to think of this as being our family. This has enabled us to produce a wide range of publications, provide a highly valued advice line, respond to public consultations, deliver training and conferences, and continue to draw on the expertise of our advisory groups and practice forums. There has always been an international element to this – what we have learnt from other countries and what they have learnt from us.

As I discovered in working on the special edition of our *Adoption & Fostering* journal, and the 950 articles that have been published over 40 years, there are many child and family-related issues that have already been explored in great detail. There are those issues that have led to significant positive developments, and there are troubling issues that seem to repeat themselves over and over again. And there is also much that could be drawn on for the Care Inquiry, which must not begin with the assumption that we need a “start again” programme of change. We are in a much stronger position than that. However, this is not to deny that there are some very significant issues to be addressed when it comes to the adequacy of our current response to children and families in serious difficulties. Summarising this in 10 minutes is quite a challenge, but here we go.

We know that the first **1,000 days** of every child’s life is a critical period in influencing and determining the next **300,000 days** – on the assumption that we typically live to 80. We know that the issues for the care system are hugely influenced by the adverse

experiences of some children in those ***first 1,000 days, especially when it comes to abuse and neglect***. The design and operation of the care system must be driven by a fundamental recognition of the severe and long-lasting consequences of those first 1,000 days-plus, in the creation of child and family-focused services guided by the co-operative effort of us all, our commitment and determination.

The weight of research evidence and professional experience reinforces time and time again that the ***intimacy, sensitivity, commitment and continuity of family life*** are core to every human being in enabling their growth, development, well-being and engagement in the world around them. But we also know that family life can be difficult – indeed, very difficult. This can result from a combination of three overarching issues – individual issues with past experiences playing an influential part; relationship issues with past experiences playing an influential part; and then resource issues resulting from unemployment, lack of housing, highly stressed communities, discrimination and inequalities.

When families find themselves in a crisis – whether this is short, medium or longer-term – they need support, resources and time to resolve the underlying and determining issues. That is common knowledge, and particularly so in current times. In some families, the risks and consequences are so significant that family relationships break down – with significant and severe consequences for the adults and children. The Children Act 1989, a huge transformative change which is itself 30 years old, sets out a child and family-focused framework to address these issues, from “children in need”, to a child in need of a “child protection plan”, to children who become subject to “care proceedings”. While the child’s safety, welfare, development, well-being and rights are core to the Act, the central issue is the child’s need for a family life forever. And core to this is the child’s need for personal, subjective experiences that are driven by intimacy, sensitivity, commitment and continuity – as it would be for every child.

We have come to express these issues as every child’s need for permanence, whether that is within the child’s birth family, including the child’s parents or wider family, or with “stranger” carers, where this is legally secured by a care order, special guardianship order or adoption order. We also know that the making of these placements is not the end of the story, as we once thought that it was, with urgent

and continuing issues for the child and their carers and the need for a wide range of support whatever the nature of the placement.

Underpinning the need for insightful, evidence-informed and sufficiently resourced support, there is the overwhelming importance of services being delivered based on relationships that are safe, open, honest, warm and empathetic, driven by the emotions, thoughts and actions of those involved. There is a strong link here to my training as a social worker – many years ago. Here, the focus of what I was being drilled to learn and do was rooted in my limited capacity to engage with those I worked with, underpinned by three principles – accurate empathy, a non-judgmental attitude, and non-possessive warmth. I would now add to that a fourth – the significance of respect.

But there is a significant dilemma underlying these fundamental principles of practice, based on the issue that State-delivered services are driven by degrees of accountability, compliance and resource limitations. Social work was in my view established as a relationship-based profession, but 40+ years of experience indicate that this is now a challenging set of principles when it comes to embedding them in a supportive organisational context.

This is particularly the case when children's services are involved in making heart-wrenching decisions that are inevitably judgemental when it comes to the safety, welfare and development of children in the context of parental care that is seen to be high risk. And that so often results in action that puts us on one side and the family on the other, resulting in division, conflict, opposition and condemnation, and the breakdown of trust. This is powerfully evidenced through care proceedings, where the local authority has issued those proceedings and the parents' actions or inactions are the cause of those proceedings needing to be issued – and then there is the child who is facing in both directions. Whatever the outcome of proceedings, these issues will continue in one form or another. That returns us to the impact on the child of the first 1,000 days-plus, and what children will have come to learn from this time – that adults are not to be trusted whoever they are, whether that is for food, daily routine, a loving cuddle, health, or learning to play and enjoy. Those experiences become deeply embedded in the child's memory, and those memories may then cast a long shadow for the child in feelings that they will be judged, ignored, punished and seen

to have failed, and then rejected once again. As much as carers or professionals try to convey the message that 'We love you', and everything that is connected to this – if that is allowed – the nightmare of those first 1,000 days casts a shadow for the child over the placement that is persistent and real. That is also likely to impact on the fear of blame and failure for the child's carers, whatever the order under which the child is placed.

There is widespread recognition of these issues in the sector, and there have been significant opportunities resourced and enabled by, for instance, the Adoption Support Fund in England. But there continue to be substantial questions about the application of these principles of relationship, informed and driven in other parts of the sector – special guardianship and fostering when it comes to child placement, but it is as important when working with birth families in the broader context of our duties and responsibilities.

It is my hope that the Care Review will recognise the fundamental importance of the relational nature of children's services, and the qualities inherent in those relationships working well when it comes to the safety, security, growth and development of individuals in their first 1,000 days and for the next period of 300,000 days. Nothing could be more life-changing.