

TUSLA

An Ghníomhaireacht um
Leanaí agus an Teaghlach
Child and Family Agency

Supporting the participation of parents of children in care to enhance the experience of contact & access



A collaborative study between
TUSLA Mid-West Area, Clarecare,
Limerick Social Service Council,
Silver Arch Family Resource Centre
& UCD

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2019

Why did we undertake this project?

The loss experienced by parents when their children enter care cannot be underestimated and agencies working with parents have to strive to achieve a balance between safeguarding children and supporting parents to resume the care of their children safely. In some circumstances, where this cannot be achieved, the focus of work may turn to looking at how best to involve parents in their child's upbringing even though they may not be able to live with them on a day-to-day basis. Maintaining positive relationships, attachments and bonds through contact and access is critical to this process for both the child and the parent.

Previous research undertaken in the Mid-West indicated that many parents feel confused and powerless when their child enters care and often experience a sense of stigma. Parents reported that they didn't always understand the legal and administrative procedures linked with care admissions and felt that they had little opportunity to be heard. Together with local parent advocacy services, a new project was established to look at how these issues could be addressed in practice and parents supported in participating in the care of their children. Funding was secured through TUSLA seed funding for parental participation.



What was the purpose of the project?

The purpose of this project was:

- To improve service planning in relation to access for children in care to their parents & other significant family members through parental participation & partnership;
- To produce information resources for parents & social workers in relation to access and contact.

What do we mean by Parental Participation?

Parental participation means providing opportunities for all parents to have a say in the decisions affecting their lives and the lives of their children.

Who was involved?

Parents of children in care, TUSLA social workers, PPFS, advocacy workers for parents of children in care, TUSLA researcher & academic consultant.

What did we do?

Firstly, a project steering group was set up which included:

- 2 parents of children in care;
- Representatives from the 3 local advocacy groups for parents of children in care;
- Researcher;
- 3 senior managers;
- 2 principal social workers.

Secondly, we needed to know more about parents' views and those who were working with them. To do this we sent:

- Postal questionnaires to parents whose children were in care or who had left care in the 6 months beforehand;
- An online questionnaire to social workers and social care workers who work with children in care;

Thirdly, focus groups were then held separately with parents and social workers.

Lastly we brought the steering group together to review the results.

How did we safeguard the best interests of the parents involved in the study?

- The study was granted ethical approval by the Tusla ethics committee. This is done in any research involving service users to ensure they are protected and minimise any risk of harm.
- 2 principal social workers acted as “gatekeepers” to the study. They had a specific role to identify parents who may find the project overwhelming or painful or who may need additional support to minimise any potential distress. In addition, a principal social worker and an advocacy worker were on hand during the face to face focus group discussions to support parents if issues arose.
- Parents were advised of TUSLA’s complaints policy and procedures if they felt unhappy at any stage of the process.

What did the information gathered from parents tell us?

Parents provided a lot of detail on their “lived experience” as parents of children in care and this helped with understanding the complexity of the issues facing parents in their relationships with their children, other care givers and Tusla. Key features in the responses included:

- The role of addiction in the lives of many parents;
- The link between addiction and children coming into care;
- The enormous efforts being made by parents to overcome addiction;
- The trauma of separation and the role access can play in overcoming this;
- The experience of stigma & shame;
- The need for services in their own right, such as support & counselling;
- The need for help with communicating with their children;

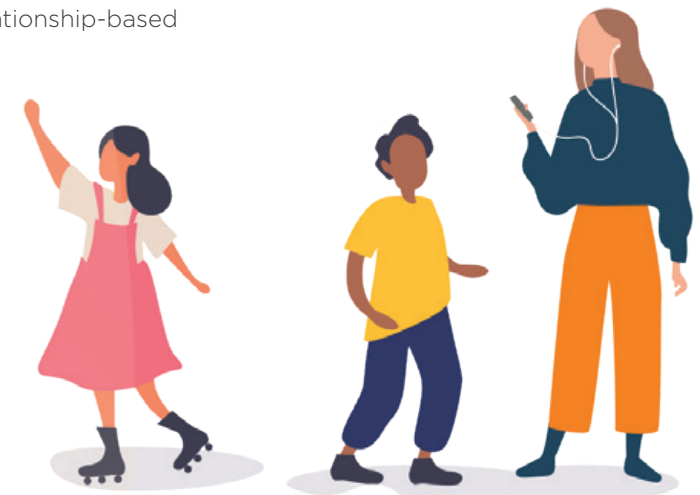
- The need for continuity in the provision of therapeutic supports after children return home;
- The importance of respect in their relationships with social workers;
- The impact of multiple changes in social worker.

What did the information gathered from social workers tell us?

Key features in the responses included:

- Access between the child and parent is highly valued;
- Advocacy support services for parents were seen as crucially important;
- Some access arrangements involve the management of risks;
- Access was also used to assess the appropriateness of reunification;
- The quality of access could be enhanced using a relationship-based practice approach;

- Therapeutic support for parents would help with the planning of access;
- The need for ‘supported access’;
- The need for emotional support to parents when access does not go well;
- The high turnover of social workers impacts on the management of access;
- Uncertainty regarding the duration of care has a negative impact on access arrangements.



Summary of research findings

- The experiences and circumstances of parents of children in care vary considerably. While there were some common themes, a variety of approaches is likely to be needed.
- Many parents of children in care have significant needs;
- Hope was important to parents. However, there was a disparity between some parents' understanding of the rationale for access and the care plan and what the social workers were saying. This was particularly heart breaking for the parent when there was confusion about whether the children would be returning home.
- There is a need for increased sensitivity to the circumstances of parents and the challenges they face;
- The participatory process in itself improves communication and increases the capacity of parents and other key partners to engage positively in access planning;
- Participatory practice offers opportunities for parents to influence service delivery;
- It's important to get it right from the start: greater consultation with parents on the access plan early on in the care admission is likely to improve outcomes.

What was the main learning?

Overall, participatory practice & partnership working is effective. It can:

- change the experience of parents and give them hope for change;
- enable wider understanding of issues;
- contribute towards feelings of being heard, valued and respected;
- provide opportunities to inform service planning and for services to better respond;
- address power differentials and give parents a mandate for their opinions;
- facilitate the development of new skills, including group participation;
- create opportunities for achievement to help other parents and social workers;
- provide a platform for involvement in other participatory projects and new learning.



What changes to TUSLA policy & practice does the research findings recommend?

- A participatory practice model should be adopted by Tusla. This has enormous benefits for parents and social workers, and it leads to a greater understanding of each other's roles and empowers parents to influence the plan for access to their children;
- The importance of the assessment and promotion of attachments in access plans while evident in policy needs to be embedded into practice and include the extended family;
- A trauma informed assessment model is needed for access planning;
- The need for a clear policy and protocol on access which outlines the level of supports or supervision required according to the care plan;
- Parents should be offered assistance with communicating with their children and addressing difficult topics like explaining why they are in care and why access arrangements take place as they do;
- The advocacy service should be expanded to increase the number of parents who can avail of the service and to facilitate communication between parents and social workers especially where there may be conflict over the care plan;

- Independently supervised access should be available as an option;
- In some cases, mediation services should be available;
- Bespoke access venues should be developed to facilitate supported or supervised contact that allows for direct care;
- Action to address staff turnover especially of social workers in children in care teams to allow for continuity in relationships and the care plan;
- A range of counselling service should be available for parents.

What resources are available?

Video

Put into words

Information booklet

Families with children in care. A guide to your rights if your child is in care.

Full research report

Roe, C., O'Brien, V. (2019) Supporting the participation of parents of children in care to enhance the experience of access & contact. A collaborative study between TUSLA Mid-West Area, Clarecare, Limerick Social Service Council, Silver Arch Family Resource Centre & UCD.

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