

Through the Eyes of the Child

A Study of Tusla Child Protection & Welfare Intervention A Research Briefing

In this Tusla commissioned study, the Trinity research team had detailed interviews with twenty children about their contact with Tusla. Overall, the children thought Tusla workers had been helpful for them and their families. While they could often see positive change, the children also thought there was room for improvement in the process. In this briefing, we highlight some of the key points they made.



What the children told us?

Children's concerns – at the beginning and along the way

- First contact with Tusla was often a time of fear and uncertainty.
- Not having a clear sense of what might happen between Tusla and their parents led to many worries and misunderstandings.
- Children had fears about how family life might be disrupted following Tusla contact. They also worried about the risk of stigma, arising from what their friends and others would think about them and their family becoming involved with Tusla.
- Worries could make it harder for them to absorb information about what was going on. What they saw as the big words professionals used could sometimes add to their problems in really understanding what was happening or where things were going.

Key lessons

- Children value having their fears acknowledged by professionals
- Clear, simple (and repeated) messages about what is happening could make a big difference. Also, important is checking constantly with the child about their current understanding of what is happening.

I know they were trying their best to help but.. it was still a worry – that they were there at all – even if I wasn't too sure why they were there to begin with – none of this makes sense is what I am saying, but I guess maybe none of their involvement made sense. Everything was so all over the place in the family, it was hard to think straight.

—
David, 17

Everyone I talked to... it was more so a rumour that every kid is supposed to know that Tusla are bad people, they take you away and all of that. That's what you were told and that's what everyone believed.

—
Ciara, 16: reflecting on the fears that Tusla's arrival can generate

What the children told us?

Communication

- The children said that they did not always understand what was going on and sometimes found it difficult to absorb the information they were given.
- Children did not always like talking about issues in their family. Sometimes, they preferred communicating about their concerns by writing things down or drawing pictures. They liked having different options on how to communicate and be listened to, including the use of Signs of Safety tools.

Key lessons

- Checking regularly with children that they understand what is being said is important, as is using child-friendly language
- Children may need to be offered many ways to communicate and be heard including writing things down and drawing pictures.

They should talk to the kids, not the exact same as they do to the adults, like, a bit similar, like tell them what's going on, they'd have to talk in more of a, not childish way, like an understandable way

—
James, 10

I felt it was nice, instead of me speaking about it, I could just write it down and they could read it and I wouldn't have to say it.

—
Aisling, 11, speaking about how she valued using 'My Three Houses'

What the children told us?

Importance of Trusting Relationships

- The children greatly valued having relationships with professionals and other adults they felt they could trust
- This trust grew through the child feeling understood, feeling that the adult was reliable and really listened to and heard their concerns. Overall, trust helped the child have a sense of really knowing what was going on.
- From what the children said, trust was hard to build and easy to lose. If the child had to deal with many different professionals, this could make trust building more difficult.

Key lessons

- Professionals should aim to build a climate of trust in their work with individual children (for example through responsiveness to child's concerns and need for information; and by following through on commitments).

[Having] someone [professional] there that I can trust, that I can talk to. If anything happens at home, I can really trust that they'll understand what's happening at home, they can definitely help

— James, 10

Once you start building trust with someone, it's kind of hard to move onto someone else to try and build trust with them too. So I think it's better if you have one person the whole time, so then you know they're there to help.

— David, 17

What the children told us?

Significance of School

- School was a vitally important part of life for the children. They greatly valued positive relations with teachers and peers.
- Yet the intimate world of school could be like a fishbowl, where there is little privacy. From that perspective children had concerns about how friends and teachers might interpret their involvement with Tusla.
- There were many references to the embarrassment of having to explain to peers why they had meetings with social workers in school.
- Children knew that teachers needed to know some things about their home life but they were also concerned about how much information about their family life should be shared with teachers. Therefore, they wanted all meetings and discussions about them to be handled with sensitivity to their privacy concerns.

Key lessons

- Children greatly valued when social workers and teachers acknowledged and addressed their concerns about their privacy on Tusla-related matters.
- Checking with children regularly about how things are going overall in their contact with Tusla - and on issues relating to school and privacy - could be helpful for the child.

One time this girl had a social worker in our class - I think 3rd class - and kids behind her back were saying 'oh she has a social worker, her parents - something happened to them, like oh my god her parents keep fighting'

— Nadia, 12

It was a bit awful really

— Adam (12), recalling his discomfort about having been called out of his classroom to meet social workers and then having to answer friends' questions on his return

What the children told us?

Participation

- For the children, there were two key angles to satisfactory participation - a) knowing what was going on when Tusla was involved with their family and b) having their own concerns listened to and respected.
- Being listened to was more important than simply getting what they wanted.
- Some wanted to be involved directly with professionals in decision making moments, others not.

Key lessons

- To participate effectively in key decisions, children need support from professionals. This includes feeling they have an 'ally' in the room and knowing who will be attending and why, how long the meetings will last, what information will be shared and what decisions may need to be taken.
- For those who did not want to be 'in the room' when decisions are being made, they mostly still wanted to have their views relayed carefully to those taking the decisions.

One of the big meetings, he [social worker] got me to write down on a piece of paper everything. Like what I felt about. And he basically just said he'd be the voice of me.

—
Adam, 12

If there's gonna be a meeting about the child, the child should have to be there cause it's about them.

—
Sadie, 15

The Child's Wider World

Child protection services become part of the child's wider world when Tusla staff make contact. This world includes family, neighbours, friends, school, sporting, cultural or youth organisations, as well other professional systems. The children reminded us often of how these actors can be an influential and potentially protective presence in their daily lives. These connections may prove to be valuable resources in support of Tusla's efforts. Ultimately, whether broadly supportive or not, these connections represent an important part of the child protection landscape.



Further Information About This Research

This **Research Briefing** provides a short summary of the study **Through the Eyes of the Child: A Study of Tusla Child Protection and Welfare Intervention**.

The methodology of the study was informed by consultation with children and young people availing of Tusla services

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