

Family Stories in Communities and Schools

A report of findings arising from the Family Stories research project

Dr Emma Maynard

Dr Wendy Sims-Schouten, Dr Nikki Fairchild, Dr Jennie Lewis-Vidler,
Dr Amy Warhurst, and Ms Katie Cramphorn

July 2021



Contents

Family Stories: Project overview	p3
Stigmatising experiences and stigmatised services	p4
The Family Stories Model: empowering sustained change	p5
“School never closes a case”: compassion worry and gamification, the brokering of whole family support by schools	p6
Covid-19 and the lost ‘hidden curriculum’	p9
Limitations and the challenges ahead	p11
Reference List and Contact details	p12

With thanks to the 24 parents, our colleagues at Portsmouth City Council, and the 28 school leaders, pastoral leaders, teachers and early years settings in Hampshire, Portsmouth, the Isle of Wight, Dorset, West Sussex, Suffolk, Sunderland and Middlesbrough, who contributed their stories to this research.

Please note, all names have been changed and any potential identifiers removed from the data.

Family Stories: Project Overview

The Family Stories project has arisen from the doctoral research of the project lead, Dr Emma Maynard. Emma worked with colleagues from Portsmouth City Council Early Help Services over some years, and her research has led to the development of a model of practice, which is currently in use in Portsmouth Early Help services under the title "Gems", which is re-explained here for a wider audience.

The project focuses on the experiences of families with complex social and healthcare needs, where those experiences may have impacted the learning, behaviour, wellbeing or the safety of their children. As a project team we firmly believe all families are born of complex experiences. The way in which our families communicate, understand and respond to each other are unique to their own histories and values, and are treasured as such. However, we also understand that where family experiences are traumatic and stigmatised, families become exposed to increasing disadvantage in ways which might restrict social and learning opportunities, and mental and physical health and wellbeing. Our aim with this work is to identify and celebrate effective practice, as reported by both families and support agencies, and to help illuminate complexities which may compromise families from moving forward from stigmatising experiences.

During Emma's initial research, twenty-four parents spoke about traumatic experiences and complex needs, including the importance of their children's schools in their lives. They explained about how their feelings about school and the relationships they had with their children's teachers and head teachers were instrumental in their own mental health, confidence in parenting, and decisions about help-seeking.

In response, Emma brought together a wider team of colleagues, who were experienced in both research and practice, and together we developed Family Stories in Schools – a project which investigated the experiences of schools in responding to the complex social and health care needs of families in their communities.

Our team:

Dr Emma Maynard, Senior Lecturer in Child & Family Studies, University of Portsmouth. Prior to becoming an academic, Emma developed and led local early help services including young carers services. She is a chartered psychologist.

Dr Wendy Sims-Schouten, Reader (Associate Professor) in Childhood Studies, University of Portsmouth. Wendy is also a chartered psychologist, and a former teacher and mental health nurse.

Dr Nikki Fairchild, Associate Head Research, and Senior Lecturer in Early Childhood Studies, University of Portsmouth. Nikki is formerly an Early Years Practitioner.

Dr Amy Warhurst, Senior Lecturer in Psychology at the University of Winchester. Formerly Amy worked as a Research Psychologist with the Educational Psychology Service.

Dr Jen Lewis-Vidler, Research Fellow, University of Portsmouth. Jen is also a highly experienced secondary school teaching assistant, and is due to begin her teacher training.

Ms Katie Cramphorn. Katie graduated from her MRes (Masters in Research degree) from the University of Portsmouth in 2020. Katie has experience of developing practice-based research, and joined us as an independent scholar.

We do not profess to hold all the answers, and we know there is much work still to do. In our work to date, our task has been to help voice the experiences of families and schools. We hope to continue developing our understanding about family needs in diverse communities, and identify ways in which research can help enrich practice. Please continue to challenge our thinking.

The Family Stories Team

Stigmatising experiences and stigmatised services

Stigma; a term once used to describe branding into the skin of slaves, dehumanising, and identified as the “the commonest form of violence used within democratic societies ...experienced intimately through stigmatising looks, comments, slights, remarks made in face-to-face or digitally mediated encounters....” (Tyler, 2021, p16-17). We need to talk about stigma.

If we track back to the dawn of humankind, we see people thriving in groups throughout time. We human beings do less well on the fringes of society. Without the warmth and protection from those around us, we died of exposure and starvation. The classic studies of Bowlby and Ainsworth laid down our understanding of Attachment Theory – the innate draw between parent and child to bond in context of nourishment, comfort and protection from harm. As we grow, these attachment bonds are replicated, firstly in developing close intimate friendships, then intimate relationships, which in time replace the attachment to our birth families. Ask any child or teenager about what matters most to them – friends, and friendship worries, will surely feature, and that doesn’t change. Friendship is belonging and acceptance. Its warmth.

Stigma is a social phenomenon that callously rejects people and places them out in the cold, over certain characteristics seen as inferior or indicative of failure. In social discourse and in literature, we voice the impact of rejection; *she was broken hearted over their gut wrenching breakup* – our emotional pain is embodied physically. But dating back to the early 2000’s psychologist Naomi Eisenberger scanned the brains of participants experiencing social rejection and concluded there is more to it; fMRI scanners revealed that there is an almost identical reaction in the brain to social rejection as there is to physical pain, deep in the anterior cingulate cortex (ACC). This means that social pain feels as though we have been physically attacked, and, if we already have prior experience, imagine how that might change our behaviour, as we anticipate that pain. Imagine also how a physical injury caused by an accident would feel different to a physical injury caused intentionally – the tissue damage might be the same, but the psychological damage would be entirely different.



The ACC, which lights up with the social, or physical pain response, is in a unique position, straddling both the limbic system (the reactive, emotional brain), and the prefrontal cortex (the rational, more logical part of the brain). This too was part of Eisenberger’s experiments. When social pain could be understood by her participants, the pain lessened. A key finding of her study was to see the difference a rational and explained reason for exclusion (*I’m sorry, I can’t give you a lift because there are no more seats in my car, but text me and I’ll meet you there!*) and a simple rejection (*Yes, I am going too, but I can’t give you a lift*). Our brains know and process the difference between an unfortunate exclusion, and a deliberate one, and furthermore, Eisenberger (2003, 2001) found processing and coming to understand the reasons for the rejection was key in calming the neurological response to social pain.

I thought, oh that’s it, great, they’ve told the bloody school... And it is embarrassing, and that’s him, that’s ‘cause of him. Lisa, parent, Family Stories

Every one of the 24 parents we spoke to as part of the Family Stories research identified stigma and fear of stigma as a key obstacle in help seeking, both from services and family. Help seeking was frowned upon, and services regarded as a potential threat

...When they came to the house I still had it in my head that they were...social services (pause) I wondered how interfering they would be.... would they take him away was it going to be a case that they would constantly be on my back, that I would never get rid of them. Meg, parent, Family Stories

The Family Stories Model: empowering sustained change

The Family Stories model has been developed from semi structured interviews with 24 parents who had received support from a combination of Early Help and Social Services teams. Nationally, figures indicate that around 50% of families who receive support from social care have further difficulties and are referred back to services again within five years, often with multiple occurrences (Troncoso, 2017; Brooks & Association of Directors of Children's Services, 2018). It is also known that despite being termed "early" help, families supported by Early Help services have often experienced needs at the higher social services level, and that a certain level of needs is determined by agencies given available evidence at the most recent contact with services – it does not indicate a type of complexity overall, and does not predict future needs (Maynard, 2019a; Hood et al, 2020).



The Family Stories research found that;

- Parents' narratives reflected deeply complex experiences stemming back to their own childhood, and recent past, and included significant levels of domestic abuse, childhood abuse, disadvantage and stigma.
- Some parents found that in light of the support they had received for their parenting, they were now questioning the parenting they had themselves as children, and the way they had previously parented their children. This was confusing and distressing.
- Several of the mothers who had experienced domestic abuse had walked away from their children, as well as their partners. While all parents presented an idealised version of themselves as *good* parents, this was especially complex, and a *good mother* narrative was particularly prominent for those who had left their children.
- All parents spoke about stigma, stigmatising services, and stigmatising experiences, such as fearing they were a bad parent, and social judgement from family, school and support services.
- Parents who had successfully sustained positive change all gave details about the shift from being judged, to being accepted. This was strongly associated by a shift from an unhappy isolated group of people, to a happy and connected family.

The recommendations from the Family Stories research has resulted in a practice guide called **Gems** (Maynard, 2019b), and the **Family Stories Model; empowering sustained change**. Gems offered a way of listening to parents' narratives to identify unique experiences and perspectives to build on for long term success. **The Family Stories Model** identified four enablers for empowering parents to sustain positive changes at home through a confident self-narrative of parenting.

I'm going to get it tattooed on me; "strike while the iron's cold". Because its just so, so simple. Beth, Family Stories

The Family Stories Model

Community Peer support, and non-judgemental practice environments in which challenges were normalised, and allowed parents to share and gain perspective, were found to positively affect fears about stigma. Parents reported they "no longer felt like the worst parent in the world".

Allyship Represents family and friends who joined with the parent. More than encouraging the parent, allies joined in new approaches, and even copied their ideas for their own lives. This form of high praise was deeply significant in building confidence, self-efficacy and willingness to reflect.

Strategy Parents talked about simple, visual and visible strategies which were shared with the whole family. They were referred to often as life hacks or mantras. Easy to recall and apply in other walks of life.

Mastery A mastery narrative was evident where parents had *Community, Allyship and Strategy*. They spoke about themselves as competent, able, nurturing fixers of family life.

“School never closes a case”: compassion, worry and gamification – the brokering of whole family support by schools.

Please note, this research reports on views from eight local authorities.

In 2021 the Family Stories project extended to Family Stories in Schools, and we were awarded some TRIF (Themes Research Innovation Fund) Grant funding from the University of Portsmouth to research how schools experienced and responded to complex family needs. Schools talked to us about building relationships with families, brokering support from external agencies, perpetual worry, and changes as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Above all, schools told us that unless they got their relationships with families and children right, the children would not be able to access learning.



I think the passion that all of us have working with our families and the relationships we've got, I think that is what keeps us all going. The passion that we've got for getting the best for these families. And just the little things that you see, like they sit there and they've done like three pages of maths and you think, "That's the most maths you've done, ever." And you just think like, "There must have been something that we've done right for you to be able get to that place where you can actually sit down and work."

Sophie, Pastoral Support Worker, Alternative Provision

Schools are acknowledged as a constant presence in children's lives, with more extended and regular contact than any other public service. As such they are at the forefront of children's needs and the expectations on schools to notice and respond follows suit as a key service in Universal Safeguarding (Lloyd, 2018; Baginsky et al, 2015). Furthermore, they rely on relationships with parents to maintain children's attendance in school, and look to parents to help support children's learning and pro-social behaviour at home. A recent upward trend in social care referrals, alongside greater autonomy held by schools has resulted in increasing pressures on schools to respond proactively (Baginsky et al, 2019), yet, our participants reported demand far outstrips supply, and further research indicates that schools do indeed shoulder more work under the Common Assessment Framework or other Early Help processes than any other partner service (Richards, 2018). Previous research led by team members Katie and Emma into Professional Curiosity (paper under peer review) concluded there is an identity crisis in some schools regarding this work. While some colleagues consider whole family engagement and the brokering of support through respectful uncertainty and professional curiosity to be essential, others felt that this compromised the role of schools and felt out of their depth in this area, citing a lack of training. Like Richards (2018) found, they had decided involvement in social issues was a "Big Ask".

However, our schools seemed, on the whole, to take a more proactive stance in supporting families. They identified 'hooks' for getting families into school, and felt that their knowledge of families over time was a huge advantage in trying to redress complex needs and inequalities. In particular, primary headteachers spoke about being at the school gates, that being present and available also made conversations accessible – and that this cut both ways: either they could approach a parent, or a parent could approach them. Secondary schools reported a closer relationship with their young people rather than parents and this reflects the less visible place of the parent on the daily school run and in the playground. This is not to say relationships with parents were missing, rather that there was more reporting of extended conversations with students themselves, as well as greater talk of risk taking and risk to mental health. We also noted schools appeared to see themselves as at the forefront of understanding community disadvantage, and were willing to take practical steps to building relationships, and maintaining children's access to learning

We get him here so we can feed him

Lucy, Primary Headteacher



I think the school is more crucial in the community now than ever before. And the parents see the school is the centre of the community so the parents will come to us for all sorts of things...

[A teacher] said "a child in year six, he smells. Nobody wants to sit next to him because he smells. His clothes are absolutely filthy." So I said, and there is Early Help involved, and I said "So, what are you going to do about it?" She said "Well I know if I phone that mum, I could say anything to her". "So, right, phone that mum. Tell her to come and get him to take him, get him showered, get him in clean clothes and then get him back to school. And if she can't wash his clothes.. tell her to bring to clothes in and we will wash them for her

Sarah, Primary headteacher

One of our key questions was to ask *How did you learn to respond to the complex needs of families?* Almost without exception, participants replied; 'we are lucky here, we have an amazing team'. Katie and Emma found exactly the same response in their work about professional curiosity – and as they concluded previously, we suggest that this should not be a question of luck, but of adequate provision and training. We note also the relentlessly optimistic view of teamwork within schools – we would be interested to know more about this, whether expectations are so clearly shared and agreed there is no need for dissent, or that whether people choose not to adopt a critical friend role for other reasons, or, that this was simply not reported to us on this occasion. Some headteachers revealed structural issues with the support they are able access in their leadership role.



I give peer supervision to my SENCO, to my learning mentor, and to my assistant head, and then obviously we're trying to do that for staff as well... but I haven't, as a Head, I don't have any [formal], supervision. Informally, the Head [neighbouring school] and I use each other

Esther, Primary Headteacher

When we asked: *If you had a magic wand, what would you do?* almost all participants replied they would increase resources to have the school acting as a front door to wrap around support. Some also reported they now provide peer supervision to bridge the gap between their original teacher training and the work they are expected to undertake in the present time, acknowledging a vast chasm between that original training and expectations today. Naturally, there were some alternative views. Some participants voiced concern about the lack of training and confidence in handling complex social issues, and several said that if that training were to be provided, they would be concerned that demand would simply increase yet further.

We also noted some participants clearly felt less confident in responding to the complex needs of families from different cultural groups to their own. One primary headteacher said she had concerns that since a child talked openly about certain issues at home, and the school approached the parents, the child had suddenly become silent. They perceived that part of the reasons for this were cultural surrounding shame in help seeking, and did not feel able to go further. Other schools noted "*problems with the mosque*" and others indicated cultural differences in the value given to school and some parents refusing to allow children to learn about sex and relationships. Most of these concerns seemed to surround professional curiosity and safeguarding, as indicated as a key issue by Munro (2011) and there is clear evidence that these factors can prevent families from black and ethnic minority communities seeking help. As discussed before, there are also clear associations with stigma (Sims-Shouten, 2018; Sims-Schouten & Carr, 2020). We also note that one secondary church school felt that their Christian ethos enabled them to respect and engage with families of different faiths, and reported they were proud of their inclusive approach which attracts Muslim and Jewish families as well as Christian families to their school. We would like to learn more about enablers and

barriers to whole family approaches by schools across cultural barriers, and suggest this is something which requires a specific exploratory focus.

We also found that almost all participants felt that the voluntary nature of early help services was actually a barrier to gaining support for families, as it can be declined. Participants states families knew how many attempts at contact would be made before they *went away again*, and there were several views that services should try harder, be more insistent, and that cases are closed far too soon. One school wanted local services to ensure they agreed to cases being closed, and that often they were the last to know it had been. However, there were also examples of good practice. One primary headteacher reported her Local Safeguarding Children's Board LSCB was "*fantastic*", with regular training advice and support. Another had been involved in the creation of the local thresholds document and felt that she was respected as a key stakeholder. Often, participants told us that where they knew people working in the MASH (multi agency safeguarding hub), they immediately had trust in one another and could talk openly. However, there was a very strong indication that for many, meticulous record keeping is a priority for schools in building the right sort of evidence, and that staff were trained in the necessary language to trigger a referral being accepted. We consider this can be viewed in two ways; positively, as a collaborative tool whereby key information is shared and common language agreed in ways that support joint working. Alternatively, this could also be interpreted as a perception by schools that they need to game the system in order to avoid being left alone managing a child's needs. We also found a complex picture of professional collegiality, alongside deep frustration at the lack of support services beyond school, also indicating a belief that families hide their needs from services. Below, Tina explains;

I used to get frustrated in the early help service, where obviously families didn't reach the threshold criteria, but there was an obvious need. Obviously, you have the phrase *good enough parenting*. But equally, you're working with families that are quite clever. And like all this disguised compliance, they tell you what they want you to know, they tell you what you want to hear. So then at the end, you know, you're when you're filling in all your sheets, and all that, you know, answer the questions, and the families are scoring really well, because obviously, they're telling you what they want to know. But even when you could go into homes. It wasn't necessary, you'd ask questions about obviously, whether that's to say the house or you know, the state of the children, and they'd always have like the magic excuse or things like that.

Gloria, Secondary School Pastoral lead

Our participants reflected the very significant emotional labour carried by schools. They talked about "*having a little cry*" at the end of the day as a normalised aspect of their role. We suggest this is why our participants emphasised so strongly the camaraderie and belief in their colleagues. It seems to us that those team relationships are the mainstay of sustaining the complex role of this profession, deemed legally to act "in loco parentis": In place of parents. Below, Jill and Lucy explain the emotional labour and involved position of schools in family lives.

So, we do those things, we contact housing, because you know, obviously, a 2-bedroom flat is not ok when you've got 5 children

Lucy, Primary Headteacher



..When you've got heavy teaching loads as well, you've got a team of mentors to deal with, you've got, you know, everything, bad behaviour to deal with perhaps and then you have incidents like that [suicide threat] your whole life becomes consumed. And I think it's the worry, what have I actually done? Have I done my job properly? ... My office buddy Sam, the other head of year, she stayed with me. Thank goodness, because I couldn't have done that on my own. And we had a chat for about an hour afterwards. And I had to keep going through *Have I done this, I'd done that. have I spoken to those people*, you know, I couldn't go home. And then I wanted to offload it so I didn't have to worry. And I think we do take the worry home, that's the biggest thing for me is, you know, worrying about what's going to happen at the weekend. Whereas it should be the parents [but] we are their parents at times, aren't we?

Jill, Secondary School Head of Year

Covid-19 and the lost 'hidden curriculum'

It (almost) goes without saying that we had to ask about Covid-19 and its impact on schools, learning, children and families. Perhaps most strikingly, not one of our 28 participants talked about learning loss, not about catching up academically; the mainstays of the UK government supposed agenda for recovery. Instead our participants talked about the loss of social learning, emotional needs of children and staff, burnout for parents, and also, some unexpected bonuses of the lock down.

One of these was an unexpected rise in attendance figures. Lucy, a primary headteacher said she felt there had been a shift from parents struggling to get their children to school each day, to huge relief that, post-lockdown, they were allowed to take them to school again. The massive increase in pressures on parents to sustain childcare 24/7, and encouragement of home learning had led, in Lucy's view, to parents being "*burnt out by Christmas*"; adding that there seemed to be a visible decline in parents' mental health during this time. While schools were physically open to all children in the Autumn term of 2020, we note that there was also a high rate of schools needing to exclude bubbles exposed to Covid-19 cases during this time, which would have inevitably led to disruption for families amid the enduring stress of the pandemic. Several participants talked about giving parenting advice to families to help them manage their children's behaviour and get them to engage with school work, and most participants told us about teachers delivering food parcels and checking in via the phone or on the doorstep. Many participants felt that this had helped reduce the stigma of help seeking, because Covid-19 was impacting *all* families, and that regular contact helped build relationships on a more positive footing. This was felt to be a significant shift from only contacting parents when there were concerns, to contacting them with offers of food and concern for their wellbeing.

Our participants reported a high level of concern for their children and young people, noticeable on their return to school. Primary schools identified a lack of the expected maturity in the summer term which is usually expected ahead of the children's transition to their next class. Secondary schools reported very high levels of anxiety, with teachers finding children in tears in corridors, unable to explain their distress.

One inner city primary reported their children had returned to school lacking the social behaviours they usually expected. They referred to this as a total lack of respect, and violent behaviour – violence was iterated several times over and we note this is unusual language for describing children's behaviour. The emphasis given to this by a whole focus group of participants indicates their own shock and disbelief at what they were seeing from children in year 4 upwards. Other primary schools also talked about the children's friendship struggles – emotions appeared particularly heightened and the children were less competent in play, and less resilient in managing friendships, and children young enough to need parental supervision appeared to have had very limited play time outside due to parents' anxieties about the virus.

I was having children who you'd never believe – very stable children, sobbing in the corridors with it. And they couldn't, they couldn't tell you why – they couldn't express it.. and it was dozens and dozens of children

Jill, Secondary Year Head



They're (social care) not dealing with what we deal with on a daily basis. And then we're just saying we've got five years of this [and the] behaviour is awful... but we haven't got the skills to be able to deal with it in a classroom situation or even outside of classroom situation. And that's, that's difficult, because the funding isn't there for trauma therapy, parents probably won't consent... There's all sorts of reasons that.. so it's really hard battle. Yeah. And we feel that we're failing them, but we literally can't do any more than what we're already doing. And we don't want to manage them out of our school, because that's hurting the kids as well... you're torn.

David, Secondary Assistant Head

We suggest that our participants' concerns reflect the loss of the 'hidden curriculum' during the time of the pandemic. The hidden curriculum refers to the learning which takes place around the formal academic curriculum, including social values and behaviour which might well support children and young people's handling of relationships and difficult experiences. The emphasis placed on these issues by our participants somewhat contradicts the UK Government's narrative during this time, with its rhetoric of children needing to catch up academically. While we did not hear any evidence that loss of academic learning was *not* concerning, the clear priority expressed by our participants was that social learning, behaviour, and mental health of children was the absolute priority in terms of regaining a settled school environment, and opportunities to access learning fully again, and as part of their whole school community. While we would agree that children already experiencing disadvantage have been adversely and disproportionately impacted, our research has indicated that also, previously confident, settled children have dropped in engagement and are now experiencing significant anxiety, and that some of the vulnerable children targeted by schools for inclusion on school sites during lockdown did favourably with closer staff to student ratios, and fewer competing distractions and agendas with the absence of their peer group.

There is now a body of research about Covid-19 and its social impact beginning to emerge, and we hope to contribute to that with these findings. Those authors have acknowledged that regrettably the UK holds the highest death toll in Europe from Covid-19, and that we started this crisis with an existing quagmire of pronounced inequalities and a decade of austerity behind us (Levine, 2020). Stark et al (2020) note the social impact of Covid-19 as a melting pot of mental health crises due to a combination of factors. These include the propensity for mental illness beginning in childhood in the context of familial stressors, with a certain increase in parental stress during this time. This included maintaining physical safety from the pandemic, availability of essentials in the early months, home schooling, impact on work and therefore financial security, and displacement from social and family support, at the same time as access to health and support services reduced. They further note these factors were already more pronounced in disadvantaged communities and that Covid-19 has sought to disrupt any previous attempts in narrowing social disparity. At the time of the first lockdown we recall grave concern from professional agencies that being locked-in together, in extreme stress and potentially in disadvantaged and over-crowded homes, would amount to a sharp rise in domestic abuse and increased risk to children. Evans et al (2020) documents parents' reports of heightened stress at home as the pandemic wreaked havoc, including thoughts of suicide, and strained parent-child relationships, with acute distress shown by children from a young age. While there are also positive stories of families bonding (Evans, 2020) and some of our data also reflects this, we therefore suggest that there is a growing body of evidence to explain the mental distress shown by children and reported by our participants. We also note the disproportionate impact in black and minority ethnic communities in the spread of Covid-19, deaths resulting from it, and social disadvantage surrounding those families. We highlight the call for rational, respectful, and honest communication about the risks and restrictions, grief and loss which Covid-19 has brought to our lives, in order to help children and young people build resilience in these adverse circumstances (Dalton et al, 2020; Maynard, 2020).



Year 2, they are very immature, year 2. They're about to go to the junior school part of the school. They've really probably not in that space that they would be because they're six months behind or eight months behind so its had a knock on effect, moving up to the next level.

June, Primary School Pastoral lead

I said frustrated before, but I'm also annoyed that there's no back up, and I'm the one who has to see those parents if they don't turn up, and that's the same with any child we're safeguarding. I have to see those parents every day, so I'm the one in the firing line all the time.

Esther, Primary Headteacher

Limitations and future challenges

We note with interest that there are some unanswered questions arising from our research, and these limitations have made us aware for the need for further work. We pose these here as reflective questions, allowing our data to inform the context and expose these as intricate, challenging phenomena to address.

We recognise that some voices are not yet included in this project, notably children and young people themselves, social care agencies, and specific ethnic groups. These are perspectives we intend to capture in further work; please tell us if you are interested in working with us to address our current gaps.

During the Family Stories research we listened to parents' stories of feeling utterly overwhelmed at the volume of negative messages received from their child's school. Therefore, we asked our school participants whether they had any insight about this, or response. Many said they could imagine that happening, but not in their own experience. Some referred to automatic systems where behaviour is logged and parents receive an automatic text. Our parent participants told us this could be up to 10, 15 or 20 texts a day and significantly impacted their confidence in help seeking, parenting, and general communication with school. We believe this warrants some further work, and would welcome any comments from schools, families and partner agencies to help us understand more about this.

A number of participants spoke about problems engaging families from black and minority ethnic communities, suggesting that **cultural barriers** further obscured potential risks (from the perspective of schools) and help seeking (from the perspective of families).

We note that all of our participants said they relied on team support for guidance and on-the-job learning. We question how robust this is, and suggest that with a less bonded team, this might become increasingly fragile. While we respect the close-knit professional communities leading our schools, which are clearly of value, **we also question whether the current structures provide adequate support** for schools seeking to break new ground in complex contemporary issues.

Our participants have reported **practice which appears excellent** – we would welcome opportunities for more in-depth work which would extend collective understanding of the impact of whole-family approaches by schools.

There is a very strong finding that **teachers at all levels take on emotional labour for children and families** in their care, and there are clear signs of mental distress for some participants. As supportive colleagues we have grave concerns about this, and further highlight that no other public service continues the relationship with children and families over years, or even over generations, in the way that schools do. We believe **the emotional labour of schools given poor resources in the social care sector warrants attention**.

Lastly, we are struck by the number of **schools proactively embracing whole family needs**, and would welcome being part of discussions which explore this further, to include role and remit, training, and resourcing implications.

To be continued... #familystories



Reference List

- Baginsky, M., Driscoll, J., and Manthorpe, J. (2015). Thinking aloud: decentralisation and safeguarding in English schools. *J. Integr. Care* 23, 352–363. doi: 10.1108/JICA-09-2015-0037
- Baginsky, M., Driscoll, J., Manthorpe, J.,k & Purcell, C. (2019) Perspectives on safeguarding and child protection in English Schools: the new education landscape explored. *Educational Research*. 61 (4). 496-481 <https://doi.org/10.1080/00131881.2019.1677167>
- Dalton, L., Rapa, E., Stein, A., (2020) Protecting the psychological health of children through effective communication about Covid-19. *The Lancet Child and Adolescent Mental Health*. 4 (5) 346-347 [https://doi.org/10.1016/S2352-4642\(20\)30097-3](https://doi.org/10.1016/S2352-4642(20)30097-3)
- Evans, S., Mikocka-Walus, A., Klas Anna, O., Sciberras, E., Karantzas, G., Westrupp, EM. (2020 "It Has Stopped Our Lives" to "Spending More Time Together Has Strengthened Bonds": The Varied Experiences of Australian Families During COVID-19 *Frontiers in Psychology* (11) <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2020.588667>
- Lloyd, M. (2018) Domestic Violence and Education: Examining the Impact of Domestic Violence on Young Children, Children, and Young People and the Potential Role of Schools. *Frontiers in Psychology*. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2018.02094>
- Maynard, E. (2019) *Beyond the script; an interpretative phenomenological analysis of autobioc selves within pedagogies of change*. Doctoral thesis. <https://winchester.elsevierpure.com/en/studentTheses/beyond-the-script>
- Maynard, E. (2020) How to help children through isolation and lockdown. *The Conversation* <https://theconversation.com/coronavirus-how-to-help-children-through-isolation-and-lockdow>
- Munro, E. (2011) The Munro review of child protection: final report. Department for Education. https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/175391/Munro-Review.pdf
- Richards, C. (2018). It's a big ask when your job is to teach children to read, write and to count: the experiences of school staff in early help and child protection. *Pastoral care in education* 36 (1) 44-56 <https://doi.org/10.1080/02643944.2017.1422003>
- Sims-Schouten, W. (2018), Child Safeguarding and Child Protection - A qualitative study into the perceptions of BAME (black, Asian and minority ethnic) Families as Service Users, *Report for the Wiltshire Racial Equality Council and the West-Wiltshire Multi-Faith Forum*.
- Sims-Schouten, W and Carr, S. (2020). Dyslexia - perceptions and support for members from ethnic minority communities, *Contact Magazine, British Dyslexia Organisation*, 14-16.
- Stark, A., White, A., Rotter, N., Basu, A. (2020) Shifting From Survival to Supporting Resilience in Children and Families in the COVID-19 Pandemic: Lessons for Informing U.S. Mental Health Priorities. *Psychological Trauma; theory, research, practice and policy*. (12) 133-155. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/tra0000781>

To get in touch

Dr Emma Maynard

School of Education & Sociology, St George's Building

University of Portsmouth, 141 High Street, Portsmouth

Emma.maynard@port.ac.uk

@DrEmmaMaynard

#familystories