

Working together to promote the rights of children affected by violence against women: an evaluative study

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Context of study

- County Mayo – Mayo Children’s Initiative – rural West of Ireland
- Funding Atlantic Philanthropies
- Focus prevention, awareness raising and children’s rights.
- Working in and with schools, statutory health and social care agencies, police, other third sector agencies;
- This presentation focuses on one aspect of wider evaluation study.



Methodology

- The full evaluation was a mixed methods study with data collected in multiple forms and from multiple perspectives;
- Quantitative data from surveys of pupils (n=333) and questionnaires with parents (n=53);
- Qualitative data from interviews with practitioners (n=37), focus groups with young people (n=33 in 8 focus groups), and with parents;
- Plus documentary data.



Key findings

1. Complexity of working across agencies;
2. Managing cross referral processes;
3. Appropriate use of range of services;
4. Raising awareness in a multi-agency context.



1. Complexity of working across agencies

- Challenges of agencies having different priorities and objectives, e.g. health and police focussing on safeguarding issues. Statutory services can be perceived as 'the source of control and oppression', whilst community-based services are considered 'neutral or more benign' (Bentovim *et al.*, 2009: 293);
- Different approaches to responding to the issues - different language, terms and understanding of the work in this area – evidence of tension between different concepts;
- Confusion around terminology and priorities can result in confusion about the agency's role;
- There is a need for recognition and acceptance of the issues across all agencies – high levels of communication and co-operation;
- Collaboration is perceived as an active, practice-led process of 'partnership in action' (Whittington, 2003: 16).



... there is something about the language and I think the whole thing with the term 'domestic violence' automatically brings it into the home and sort of sanitises it in some way and I think, from my experience ... agencies tend to use 'family conflict' or 'relationship problems' rather than naming it' (support worker).



2. Managing cross-referral processes

- Complexity of managing referrals in multi-agency environment, ensuring 'a fit between the children's different needs and the response being offered' (Buckley *et al* 2007: 206)
- Collaborative social community approach can be effective, but it may not be possible to track source or outcome;
- Need for policies that enable agencies to track referrals that they receive and generate;
- Referrals need to be monitored, processed and managed.



Case example

A specialist counselling service, commissioned through the work of MCI, was quickly able to identify potential child protection concerns for a number of children in a family, when working with one of the older children. It is possible that, without specialist intervention, these concerns may not have been disclosed for some time. However, the service instigated immediate referrals to statutory services, whilst the support of MCI and the service it had put in place were able to provide continuing support to this family.



3. Appropriate range of services

- Clarity about roles and responsibilities of all agencies and professionals involved;
- Reducing bureaucracy – responding quickly and appropriately;
- Agencies need to focus on their core purpose and not become crisis-driven replacement services compensating for cuts in provision elsewhere;
- Evidence of high level commitment to the work (e.g. through membership of steering committees);
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- Multi-agency approaches support sustainability.



'it has enhanced the workings of the agencies together around this issue ... they have come together around the issues for adults and for women and things like that, but never, not specifically for children ... certainly the MCI has helped that ...

I don't think it would have happened without it'

(steering committee member).



4. Raising awareness in a multi-agency context

- Cross-agency network allows for joint 'ownership';
- Network supports wider awareness-raising of children's rights, domestic violence and negative family conflict;
- Bringing agencies together – taking different approaches to raising awareness across the community, parents and young people.



‘It made me aware of how vulnerable children can be and how important it is that they have the courage to stand up for what they believe is right behaviour. It also helped them to identify early warning signs about not feeling safe and assuring them that nothing is too small to tell’

(Parent).



Conclusion

- There are different approaches to co-ordinating and facilitating working together in complex contexts;
- ‘the crucial element is co-ordination which must be in place to ensure that children do not slip through the net of fragmented services’ (Buckley *et al*, 2007: 306)
- successful collaborative partnerships take time and resources to develop, maintain and grow (Crawford 2011)



References

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