



Facilitating children's participation in child protection processes: The starting out with Scarba project

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- Funded by University of Western Sydney Partnership Grant



Rationale - Involving children in decision making processes emphasised by legislation

- United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989)
- *Children and Young Person's (Care and Protection) Act 1998*



Problems in implementing

- Lack of research on tools/processes for involving children in decision making and in particular in assessment processes
- Adultist orientation of much child protection work with voices of children being 'silenced'



The Benevolent Society – Scarba Services

- Tertiary child protection services – ongoing DoCS involvement
- Children 0-12 years
- Long term casework and counselling
- Psychologists, family workers and social workers
- Inner city and SW suburbs of Sydney



Scarba context at the start

- 6-8 week family assessment
 - for identifying the changes needed in family functioning
 - for reducing the risk the families pose to the well-being of children
- Scarba states “The critical perspective which underpins our framework is the child’s eye view of the family”



Aims

- Explore the obstacles to including children & other family members in child protection assessments for treatment
- Develop a tool for participatory assessments
- Evaluate & refine the tool
- Examine feasibility of extending research to larger research project on children's participation in child protection decision making processes



Nature of the project

- Qualitative research – to facilitate participant voices being heard
- Action research (cyclical, dialogue)
- Limitation (small study)



Key findings early stages

- Children's voices absent – powerless to be heard
 - Seen in interactions with parents, in terms of behaviour
 - Older children more present but not making a difference to assessment
 - Children distrusting in research interviews
- Assessments adult dominated
 - Voices of professionals
 - Attention to engaging parents
 - Focus on parenting
- Assessment process risk based contrasted with parents' focus on needs (resources and advocacy)



Findings - obstacles to implementing participation

- Conflict in implementing simultaneously protection and participation principles
 - Tensions for workers
 - powerlessness of children and fear of threatening parents
 - worker concerns about follow through with DoCS
- Tensions in UN convention principles in opposing constructions of children
 - protection: passive and vulnerable
 - participation: active and competent.



Findings cont....

- Effectively engaging children takes longer & requires different skills from engaging adults
- Children require more engaging
- Children & adults have different priorities
- Where abuse, children distrust adults but want more say



Later stages of research - focus of project on

- Providing a space for workers to reflect on issues
- confronting tensions between protection & participation
- implementing aspects of a child participation within assessment
- evaluating the outcomes of new tools/processes



Identifying & implementing new processes to enhance children's participation in assessment

The teams developed a set of **principles** to guide the development of tools and processes for participatory assessment



Individual and service level

- Children have the right to
 - express their opinion and to have that opinion taken into account
 - access to information to help them make a decision
 - a response as to why their opinion is not acted on
- Explaining participation principle
- Skilled and respectful interactions
- Developing our skills
- Evaluating what children think – continuous improvement
- Employees aware of & access specialists



Organisation and systems level

- Advocating for children's participation in broader systems
- Exploring resource implications of children's participation
- The child protection context presents particular challenges around participation - it is crucial that these are articulated so that participation is maintained



Participation action plans - Tools/processes developed by teams

- Doing introductions differently
- Including children directly in assessment
- Collaborating and communicating differently with parents
- Tools – children's contracts, information booklets, creative mediums
- Documenting children's views – reports, PPMs
- Children's consent



- Supervision checklists
- Evaluation processes
- Changing closure policies
- Systems level actions
- Skill development and reflection processes



Outcomes of process - Gains in child centredness.

- Workers more in touch with the child
- More accountability to child
- More aware of adult/child power imbalances
- Increased worker understanding of, & connection with child's experiences
- Children given more information but needs to be individualised
- Children's views documented as significant in the assessment



Outcomes - Gains for parents and child

- Facilitates more respectful attitude to parents as well as children
- Parents talking with workers about child more
- Models for parents a more respectful attitude to children



Implications for workers/agency

- Time consuming, more difficult for manager
- Identified that 'participation is a process'
- Requires resources and support
- Energising and draining
- Requires more advocacy for child
- May isolate Scarba workers from agencies not focusing on child participation
- Will change relationship with DoCS as requires greater cooperation around child



Conclusion - inclusion of children in decision making in child protection

- **Participation**

- *can* make a difference in promoting their interests
- involves policy and practice changes fraught with difficulties/challenges
- is influenced by how agencies can co-operate around placing the child's voice centrally in their processes

Our findings raise the question

- *Can we ethically stop our attempts to facilitate participation of children in child protection processes here?*