



The use of sociograms to explore collaboration in child protection conferences[☆]

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ABSTRACT

The Strengthening Families child protection conference model attempts to empower parents' participation in conferences and to enhance collaboration between conference participants. This paper, which is part of a broader study looking at the implementation of the Strengthening Families model across a county council in England, UK, explored the use of 'power' and 'mutual interaction' in both traditional and Strengthening Families child protection conferences. Data was collected using sociograms which were recorded during observations of the two types of conferences. Sociograms were analysed in order to identify patterns in terms of 'power' and 'communication' together with the use of the 'group cohesion index' which enabled us to draw conclusions about the degree of interaction between conference participants.

Findings indicated a difference between the use of power in traditional and Strengthening Families conferences. In traditional conferences the power was mostly static (held by the chair), and in the Strengthening Families conferences power was shifted from the leader of the collaboration (chair) to the people who administer the collaboration (conference participants). Also, in the Strengthening Families model more interaction between conference participants and better group coherence were evident; however, in both types of conference communication was limited between the professionals. Sociograms proved a useful method for exploring group dynamics in the context of child protection conferences. It is suggested that a broader understanding of the underpinning principles of the Strengthening Families model is needed to successfully empower parents' participation in conferences and to enhance collaboration between conference participants.

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1. Introduction

It has been internationally recognised that effective working and collaboration between professionals and service users is essential to promote the welfare of children and young people. For example, in England and Wales the statutory guidance *Working Together to Safeguard Children* (HM Government, 2013), the Lord Laming report (2009) and *The Munro Review of Child Protection* (Munro, 2011); in Scotland *Getting it Right for Every Child* (The Scottish Government, 2008, 2012); and in Australia the first *National Framework for protecting Australia's children 2009–2020* (Council of Australian Governments, 2009) all emphasise the need to improve interagency working to ensure effective child protection services. In the USA, policy change over the past 10 years has focussed on the integration of services in the child welfare system and on the development of collaborative programmes

(Ehrle, Scarella, & Geen, 2004). Similarly, the WHO Regional Office for Europe in its policy briefing has emphasised the multi-sectorial approach as the most effective way of promoting children's safety (World Health Organisation, 2007). In recognition of the importance of collaboration in child protection, intervention programmes have been developed across many countries nationwide. In Australia, the state of New South Wales (NSW) has developed a five year plan called *Keep Them Safe: A shared approach to child wellbeing* (New South Wales, 2009) which advocates interagency collaboration for promoting the welfare of children. The British Columbia government in Canada (Ministry of Justice, 2012) has developed *The Child Protection Mediation Programme* which aims to enhance collaboration between parents, extended family, child welfare workers and others through the use of a mediator (trained professional) in order for all individuals involved to plan for the child's future.

An interagency setting in which professionals and service users (family) are brought together to share information about a child's developmental needs and their parents' capacity to respond to those needs is the Initial Child Protection Conference (ICPC). The ICPC is convened when agencies have reasonable cause to suspect that a child is suffering or is likely to suffer 'significant harm' under Section 47 of the Children Act 1989 (HM Government, 2013). Although parents' presence in the conferences has improved the quality of information available (Bell, 1999), studies have reported difficulties in collaboration between

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professionals and parents (Buckley, Carr, & Whelan, 2011; Farmer & Owen, 1995; Thoburn, Lewis, & Shemmings, 1995). Studies in the UK employing a range of research methodologies (questionnaires, analysis of verbal exchange, interviews, and observations) have reported restrictions on parents' participation in the conferences (Hall & Slembrouck, 2001) with parents describing the process of the conference as unpleasant (Corby, Millar, & Young, 1996) and stressful. Research has shown that parents often take a passive role and have little impact on information sharing at the beginning of the process (Ghaffar, Manby, & Race, 2012) and on decisions made or on conference plans (Buckley et al., 2011). The emphasis of the conferences is on risk assessment with parents seeing their role as defensive, feeling that they are treated as objects rather than participants, while the professionals' role is perceived by parents as dominating (Farmer & Owen, 1995). Similar results have also been reported in Canada (Dumbrill, 2006) with parents feeling that professionals use power over them and in Australia (Cambell, 1997) with parents reporting that they 'felt' like they were regarded as perpetrators, and not as conference participants.

1.1. The Strengthening Families conference model

In an attempt to overcome the above challenges of collaboration between professionals and parents the Strengthening Families conference model was developed by West Berkshire Council children's services in England in cooperation with Olmsted County Child and Family Services in Minnesota (Lohrbach & Sawyer, 2004). The model builds on Turnell and Edwards (1997, 1999) Signs of Safety work. The Signs of Safety approach to child protection casework is based on the principles of brief solution-focussed therapy (Berg, 1994) in ways that empower families and increase cooperation. This approach has been adopted across several countries (Wheeler & Hogg, 2011) and is underpinned by three principles: constructive working relationships, critical thinking and valuing the complexity of frontline practice (Turnell, 2012). The Signs of Safety framework focusses on understanding the position of each family member, finding exceptions to the problem and discovering family strengths and resources (Myers, 2005). According to Turnell and Edwards (1999: 30–31) partnership is built on the following principles: respect of service recipients, cooperation "with the person [and] not the abuse", recognition "that cooperation is possible even where coercion is required", recognition "that all families have signs of safety", understanding of families' concerns and desires, and a "focus on creating small change [s]". According to Turnell and Edwards (1997: 180) the ultimate test of partnership in child protection work is when the statutory agency and family achieve "specific, mutually understood goals".

Whereas in traditional conferences professionals initially share information about the child(ren), family and the reasons that brought the case to conference, the Strengthening Families model aims to empower parents from the very beginning by asking them to help develop a family tree or genogram which is recorded by the Chair. The framework, on which information is shared by professionals and parents in the Strengthening Families model, focusses not only on risks and concerns (as in traditional ICPCs) but also on family strengths and protective factors (Griffiths & Roe, 2006). The completion of the detailed framework of the Strengthening Families model enables professionals to build a full picture of the family and complicating factors in order to develop an achievable plan and realistic outcomes focussing on the child(ren)'s needs. Thus, the Strengthening Families approach aims to enhance collaboration between professionals and parents ensuring that parents are listened to, respected and actively involved (Griffiths & Roe, 2006).

While the Strengthening Families model claims to be collaborative and to improve constructive partnership there is limited evidence (Griffiths & Roe, 2006) of its implementation in child protection conferences and particularly on how this model enables professionals to collaborate between themselves and with parents.

1.2. Themes in collaborative practice

Research has shown that the greater the collaboration, the greater the number of examples that showed: continuity in support of the parents after the conferences, consensus in decision making, reduction in ambiguous messages between professionals and with parents, and a problem solving approach across the team to secure children's safety (Miller & Freeman, 2003). Despite the recognition of the necessity of collaboration between agencies, barriers to multi-agency working have been well documented internationally. These include issues regarding different policy agendas; confidentiality and sharing information; power struggles; professional models; differing operational models; lack of consensus on aims; lack of common language; agencies' concerns about protecting their own identities, ideologies, roles, and resources (Lupton, North, & Khan, 2001; Miller & Ahmad, 2000; Robinson & Cottrell, 2005; Sloper, 2004; Worral-Davies & Cottrell, 2009). The majority of these papers explore collaboration at an organisational level failing to include service users as stakeholders. Thus there is little evidence of how professionals collaborate and work together with parents during ICPCs where the aim of the conference is to plan how best to safeguard and promote the welfare of the child.

In order to explore collaboration in community and public sector settings Huxham and Vangen (1996, 2001, 2005) developed a practice-oriented theory of collaboration by identifying themes in collaborative practice. Some of the themes particularly relevant to child protection practice include: trust, defining shared aims, the management of power and communication.

Trust is what makes collaboration distinct from other types of working as parties have to trust each other so that they work towards common objectives (Vangen & Huxham, 2003). However, trust is not easy to achieve (Huxham & Vangen, 1996); and there should be acknowledgement of the real tensions involved in sharing power and trusting parents who may well have perpetrated abuse. A small minority of families have been shown to be very powerful and able to manipulate and intimidate professionals (Laming, 2009; Pearson, 2009). Agreeing shared aims and goals is a fundamental step in collaborative practice, in being clear about what needs to be achieved (Huxham & Vangen, 1996). It is understandable that different players in the collaboration begin with different expectations and different perspectives of their own involvement (Balloch & Taylor, 2001). However, managing aims has to be perceived as an on-going purpose of collaborative work rather than one that has to be achieved from the beginning (Huxham & Vangen, 2001).

One of the key elements of any partnership is the equitable spread of power between the partners (Potito, Day, Carson, & Loary, 2009). The definition of power has its roots in Max Weber's theorising of power which is a capacity held by certain groups, individuals or institutions over others in order to directly secure their interests (Allen, 2004). In understanding the concept of power in collaborative situations Huxham and Vangen (2004) looked at where power is used to influence the way in which collaboration is taking place. Huxham and Vangen (2004:193) called these "points of power" and argued that initially power is held by those who name the collaboration, selecting who is to be involved, organising the location of meetings, and determining how responsibilities are to be shared. Another "point of power" is the meeting chair or facilitator and those who are responsible for organising the timing of meetings. Power is not static, but continually changing (Huxham & Vangen, 2004) and "comes from a number of sources at both macro and micro levels" (Potito et al., 2009: 379).

Initially, in the child protection conference process power is held by those who are involved pre-conference planning work (Social Workers and Chairs of ICPCs), and should move to those who administer the collaboration (other ICPC participants) so that all parties in the collaboration will "have the chance to exert power" at some stage (Huxham & Vangen, 2005: 193; Potito et al., 2009). Yet, research on traditional ICPCs has highlighted a power imbalance during conferences where

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