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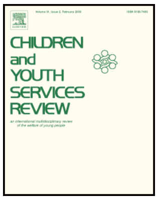

Meeting children's needs within a family focussed agenda: The case of support care

Louise Roberts *

Children's Social Care Research and Development Centre (CASCADE), School of Social Sciences, Cardiff University, Glamorgan Building, King Edward VII Avenue, Cardiff, Wales CF10 3WT, UK,

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ABSTRACT

This article is concerned with the experiences and perspectives of eleven children engaged with a family support service in England and Wales, UK. Support care is a short break provision for children, designed to ease family tensions and prevent long-term separation. Children and young people are most affected by families' involvement with the service as they have to spend regular periods away from their parents and home. The article is based on findings from a qualitative case study of support care. Eighty-two qualitative interviews and 22 h of participant observation were undertaken with children and young people, parents, support carers and social workers. Children's experiences of support care are examined within the article and this includes consideration of initial engagement with the service, the delivery of care and the relationships established with carers over the course of the intervention. Some practice tensions are highlighted in efforts to support children as well as maintain emphasis on family-focussed objectives. It is argued that the service specific issues raised have wider relevance for family support and social work policy and practice.

1. Introduction

This paper is concerned with the experiences and perspectives of children engaged with the support care service. Support care is a support service for families at risk of children being placed in out-of-home care. Over the course of the intervention children spend a series of short breaks with a support carer. The service aims to be flexible and responsive to need, but typically involves children having one or two overnight stays per month, for a period of between nine and twelve months. During this time, parents may access other specialist services (such as counselling, parenting courses, and drug and alcohol support) and it is hoped that by the end of the intervention relationships will have improved and the likelihood of family breakdown rescinded.

The qualitative research upon which this paper is based aimed to uncover the 'doing' of support care and sought to understand how the service was delivered and experienced. All key stakeholders were encouraged to participate including carers, social workers and service users. The study actively encouraged the participation of children and young people, and recognised them as active agents with voice (O'Kane, 2008). As argued by Lansdown (2009: 12):

> Children from the youngest ages are able to form views, even where they are not able to communicate them verbally. There should be no lower age limit on the right to participate, and it should not be limited to the expression of views in 'adult' language.

As a stakeholder group, children and young people are most affected by engagement with the support care service. Despite being framed as a family support service, children have to spend regular periods away from their parents and home. Prior to this research, little was known about children's individual experiences within support care, how time was spent during the short break sessions or the relationship development with support carers over the course of the intervention. Consequently, this paper is concerned with the experiences and perspectives of eleven children and young people whose families participated in a qualitative case study of the support care service. The remainder of the paper will provide a summary of the support care service, together with details about the research study. Children's experiences of the service are considered through a beginning, middle and end overview of their engagement with support care. The issues highlighted through the case study are then considered within the UK social policy and practice context which includes the recent favouring of 'whole family' approaches and time-limited models of support.

1.1. The research setting

Support care is designed for families at risk of breakdown and the placement of children in out-of-home care. The service can be thought of as a development of short breaks for disabled children, but differs in its time-limited nature and its inclusion of all children rather than being exclusive to those with disabilities. The Fostering Network (2008: 5) has promoted support care across England and Wales since the 1990s and describes it as being "at the interface of fostering services and [home-based] family support services". Akin to a part-time fostering

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* Tel.: +44 2920 874000
E-mail address: RobertsL18@cf.ac.uk.

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service, families are matched with a support carer who, over the course of the intervention, attempts to befriend the family and provide a series of short breaks for children. Support carers may also be tasked with encouraging children's development and/or positive behaviour.

Research related to support care is limited and only two major studies have been conducted (Aldgate & Bradley, 1999; Greenfields & Statham, 2004). Aldgate and Bradley's (1999) research incorporated a before and after design with sixty children and their families accessing the service. Interviews and psychometric tests were combined to give personal insight into the service as well as a quantifiable measure of progress. Children's perspectives of support care have only previously been considered by Aldgate and Bradley (1999). They found that children were initially reluctant to engage with the service but this improved over time as they established relationships with carers. The authors also found that some children were upset and confused by the ending of the intervention.

Greenfields and Statham (2004) investigated the relatively slow development of support care across England via interviews, questionnaires and case studies of operating services. The authors observed much variety between services in terms of size, operational structure and placement length. They concluded that the service was highly valued by participants but improved data collection and monitoring of families was required in order to demonstrate positive impact.

In this research, a qualitative case study was undertaken in order to build on the previous studies and provide a detailed understanding of the 'doing' of support care. The aim was to explore how the service was delivered and the ways in which it was perceived and understood by different stakeholders. With regard to children and young people, the study sought to consider the development of relationships between carers and children, and examine children's views and experiences of the short break sessions.

2. Method

2.1. Sample

Three support care schemes across England and Wales participated in the research and ten placements were followed for their duration. Eleven children and young people participated in the research, whose ages varied from a few months to fifteen years old. Children's experiences of support care were also considered by parents, support carers and social workers. The majority of participants experienced a minimum of three contact points with the researcher. Contact with children occurred in a variety of settings, including the support carer's home, in neutral venues, during short break sessions and more formal review meetings.

2.2. Ethics

Ethical approval for the project was secured from XXXX University's School of Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee. Where appropriate, participants were provided with accessible information sheets and were required to provide written consent. Parents provided written consent for their children to participate. For younger children, Cocks' (2006: 257) notion of assent was utilised. This involved being conscious of the "child's state of being", taking a reflexive approach to reactions and signals that they were or were not happy to engage in the research. This approach was adopted for all children, regardless of whether they had formally provided consent.

2.3. Data collection

Semi-structured interviews and participant observation constituted the core research methods. For adult participants, qualitative interviews enabled insight into the way they felt, viewed and made sense of their experiences (Rubin & Rubin, 1995). The method has also been recognised as enabling children "to talk about issues important to them" (Roberts & Priest, 2010: 258) and suitable for older as well as younger children (Winter, 2010). In an attempt to "maximise children's ability to express themselves" (Hill, 1997: 180) disposable cameras and art materials were available for use during or between interview sessions. Younger children were also engaged through play as a means of encouraging communication of their views.

Participant observation was conducted at support care meetings, reviews and short break sessions. For younger children and infants, observations have long proved a valuable means of facilitating their participation (Clark, McQuail, & Moss, 2003). Observations were concerned with the emotional presentation of children, the activities they were engaged in, together with any other relevant information regarding the context. Whilst it is recognised that the participation of preverbal children was reliant upon interpretations of their behaviours and presentation, the research methods nevertheless provided a means by which the support care experiences of very young children could be considered within the research.

Over the course of data collection, eighty-two individual interviews were conducted, including eleven with children, and recordings made from twenty-two participant observation sessions. The data generated was anonymised, with all participants being assigned pseudonyms. The data was analysed using an inductive qualitative thematic approach (Seale, 2004).

3. Results

As part of an exploration into the 'doing' of support care, the research sought to consider children's experiences of the support care service. This included their understandings and feelings towards the service, how time was spent during short break sessions and the relationships forged with support carers over the course of the intervention. Over the course of data collection and analysis, a series of potential conflicts or challenges became apparent in relation to:

- The impact of framing services as child-centred or family-focussed.
- The delivery of short break support as providing 'realistic' care or enrichment of children's lives.
- The development of positive relationships between children and carers balanced with the time-limited, temporary nature of the service.

These analytic themes will be explored in relation to a beginning, middle and end overview of children's experiences of support care, namely, their initial responses to the service, the experiences encountered during the short breaks and the ending of the relationships.

3.1. Child-centred or family focussed support?

Support care is framed as a family support service. Support carers are matched with families and through the provision of short breaks it is hoped that difficulties will be eased and long-term family separation avoided. Despite some scepticism in the UK about the ability to 'fix' families (Community Care, 2009), including the former Secretary of State for Education, Michael Gove arguing that children should be 'rescued' from abusive or unchanging parents (Gove, 2013), the holistic, 'whole family' framing of support care resonates with the general trend of recent UK social care policy and practice (HM Government, 2012; Morris et al., 2008; WAG, 2011). For example Parton (2009) observed that notions of 'child centred' approaches have been overshadowed by policy emphasis in favour of the 'family'. For support care, a more inclusive consideration of families' needs is visible as carers attempt to forge positive relationships with parents and other family members, in addition to providing short breaks for children. Yet despite such efforts, it remains the case that the vast majority of support carers' time is spent with children, away from their parents. The impact of support care's emphasis on the needs of the family is considered below and includes exploration of the ways in which children and young people were introduced to the service and how consent for their engagement was secured.