

Written evidence submitted by Placement Support

Education Select Committee: The impact of COVID-19 on education and children's services

Evidence from Placement Support:

Introduction

Placement Support is a multi-disciplinary team combining specialists with wide experience of working and living with vulnerable children and families. Our expertise includes psychotherapy, social-work, and education, with particular focus on the way children and those who care for them live together. Our support is provided through face-to-face and on-line work. Our on-line services have been in operation for more than five years and are highly regarded.

Placement Support works with families, schools, children's homes, and foster families to promote sustaining relationships between children and the adults involved in their lives. We are also an Ofsted registered Adoption Support Agency. We have particular expertise to help make sense of the ways that early adverse experience can make it difficult for children to get on with their lives in the present. We also provide training for carers and associated professional networks.

We are submitting evidence to contribute to an overview of the function of education and children's services through the pandemic and to draw attention to new ways of online working to provide therapy for children and families, enhance multiagency working, and efficiently deliver training to groups who would struggle to attend physical events....

Evidence:

Education

The majority of the young people we work with struggle to integrate within mainstream school. This difficulty usually reflects the aftermath of early adverse experience generally associated with abuse, neglect, and issues of parental mental health. This can complexify the experience of socialisation authority and structure within school systems leaving children feeling they are square-pegs being forced into in round-holes. These frictions play out at home in conflict with adoptive, foster and special guardian carers and reverberate in ways that impact across family systems.

Many of our families report a positive consequence of the lockdown has been that they have not had to pressurise children to attend school this has reduced stress for young people leading to a reduction in the emotional temperature within the family household. Our work has then become focused on how to support families in the delivery of the curriculum at home. These newly learnt skills are potentially an asset for schools and families going forward as education "reboots". The process of return also affords an opportunity for teachers, children and their families to notice and talk about square-peg / round-hole scenarios in order to learn from experience.

Social Care

Some adoptive families with traumatised adolescents have experienced the stringency of the lockdown as an intensification of conflictual dynamics within the household in which neither parents nor children can get space away from each other. In several instances, a consequent increase in violent and risk-taking behaviours have led children's services to commission respite placements for periods of 4 weeks to remove children who are struggling at home. These placements have been

offered by residential childcare providers at inflated rates often £1000 per day. In our view, the placements have been of limited quality and, in one instance the placement potentially accelerated the permanent breakdown of an adoption.

There is a desperate need to design more tailored interventions that can look after a whole family rather than designate a child as the problem and then remove them from the family household. This could be done through therapeutic teams that work with the whole family and so are not experienced as strangers who take children away in the midst of a crisis.

On-line services

It is increasingly clear that young people's routine use of technology and social media equips them to engage with therapy online. We have been able to provide sustaining services for children aged between 10 & 18. Stand-out moments include a little boy who asked his therapist to hide in a toy box with him and so took her there online using his tablet. This flexibility means a child can play with a therapist within their own familiar surroundings and increases the chance they will trust their therapist with precious and sensitive information that can help with sense making. These kinds of services have to be closely managed and the work linked in with the child's parents to ensure things are kept safe. In our view, this approach has potential to achieve good results in a shorter space of time because it does not require a child to be identified as a problem and taken to a specialist facility (consulting room). In addition, this approach offers the chance to reduce costs and increase the amount of time that can be devoted to therapeutic activity.

We also provide online therapeutic parenting sessions. Several parents report they could not have coped through lockdown without this regular online input. This approach ensures parents can rely on consistent weekly input they can access from their own home and use to address issues in real time.

Digital platforms allow family members to be gathered together online from different addresses and for therapists to engage with wider family systems without the physical complexities that accompany getting a group of people to same address at the same time. This makes it possible to work with difficult relationships and manage risk in a different kind of a way that may not be possible using face-to-face methods. Again, this approach offers the chance to reduce costs and increase the amount of time that can be devoted to therapeutic activity.

Digital platforms also allow wider professional networks to be gathered efficiently for meetings and reduce difficulties associated with diaries, travel and premises. Placement Support has particular expertise around the way complex cases can complexify professional networks (the Director is completing PhD research in this area). COVID-19 has necessitated a rapid increase in online meetings and a greater capability to assemble effective professional networks. It is crucial to extract and preserve positive learnings from this process going forward.

Training

Digital platforms make it possible to gather disparate groups of carers / professionals together for training events in a way that reduces difficulties associated with diaries, travel and premises. The COVID-19 emergency has accelerated imaginative processes creating new online training methods that can be delivered to groups at their home addresses. We have used the online relationship between two therapists as a teaching vehicle to teach professionals about online working in real time. Again, this approach offers the chance to reduce costs and increase the amount of time and resource that underpins training activity.

Mark Waddington (Sep 2020)
Director Placement Support

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