Title	Sustaining a 'Partnership' between Foster Carers and Social Workers. Navigating the Current Landscape of Fostering in Ireland
Authors(s)	O'Brien, Valerie, Hope, Karen
Publication date	2015-10-25
Publication information	O'Brien, Valerie, and Karen Hope. "Sustaining a 'Partnership' between Foster Carers and Social Workers. Navigating the Current Landscape of Fostering in Ireland," 2015.
Conference details	Fostering Well-Being: Together We Can Make a Difference, Letterkenny, Donegal, Ireland, 23 - 25 October, 2015
Item record/more information	http://hdl.handle.net/10197/7197

Sustaining a 'Partnership' between Foster Carers and Social Workers: Navigating the Current Landscape of Fostering in Ireland

Dr Valerie O'Brien, SWIFC & School of Social Policy, Social Work & Social Justice, UCD

&

Karen Hope, SWIFC

Paper presented to the Irish Foster Care Association Annual Conference 2015. Letterkenny, Ireland.

Relationship between Carers and SW

* What are the key strengths and areas of conflict ?

* What are the main factors shaping the relationship?

* What can assist in navigating choppy waters?

Overview of Workshop

* Meeting and greeting : Stage One
* Contexts that shape relationship and key issues of influence : Stage Two
    * Frames for 'navigating' & 'understanding' the relationship.
* Pilot findings re what works: Stage Three
* Way forward.: Stage Four
* Outcomes from the workshop: Participants views : Stage Five

Meeting, greeting & establishing the groups interest in the topic &

identify what has contributed to positive relationship building.

Stage One

Methodology

* Literature review
* Pilot : Questionnaires with
    * Social work/fostering management (2);
    * Representative of frontline fostering social workers (2)
    * Representative of foster carers (1) IFCA: based on support line data
    * Child welfare & protection consultant (1)
* Focus group with 7 social workers SWIFC

Pilot findings: Episodes within which relationship issues get played out.

* Recruitment and assessment
* Support and supervision
* Education and training
* Management of serious concerns and allegations of abuse
* Reviews – Child reviews & Foster care reviews
* Foster Care committees
* Professionalism
* Confidentiality and recording

What is SWIFC : Social Workers in Foster Care

* A special interest group/ vocational group for social workers within the Irish Association of Social Workers.

* Aims to support best practice and promote positive outcomes for children in care, including a high quality foster care service.

* Provides social work with forum to discuss issues and advocate for change in foster care

* Promote social work values and professionalism in the field

A warming exercise

* In pairs (16 people in the room)

* Introduce briefly yourself and say where you where you are from & then

* Think about a *positive foster carer & social worker relationship that you have experienced* & *identify a component/ process/ aspect* of it that *helped build and sustain the relationship* over time.

* Then in large group, each will introduce and share outcome. Outcomes will be mapped and added to presentation.

A task

* If coming to this workshop today was to be successful from your perspective,

What would you like to achieve by the end of it?

Is there a particular question that you have in your mind?

Conceptual Frameworks To Understand the context in which the relationship

Stage Two.

Commissioning provides a way to understand the relationship between foster carer and social worker

* In your respective role (SW; Foster Carer; Manager; Advocate…), it is important to be clear as to

* **WHO** IS ASKING YOU **TO DO** **WHAT** FOR **WHOM**?

  * *What is the COMMISSION?*
  * *How would you KNOW when you have done A GOOD JOB?*
  * *WHO has to CONFIRM (OR AGREE) with your JUDGEMENT?*
  * *Is the person that you are working with OPERATING WITHIN THE SAME UNDERSTANDING & IF not, what are the differences?*

Contexts of change

* TUSLA : The new Child & Family Agency
* CORU : Registration body for Social Work including complaints procedure, continuing professional development as a requirement of registration
* HIQA : Inspection Role in an era of increased regulation
* Greater accountability; transparency, regulation, centralisation/standardisation, focus on outcomes
* IFCA : Complex Mission represent Foster Care- Charter for foster carers; Innovation; Support & Advocacy

Spheres of Influence on the relationship

Duality in Roles

eg 'Support' and 'Supervision'; 'Carer' and 'Parent', 'fostering social worker' and 'child social worker'

Similarity :

* **'Best interest of children' and 'improved outcomes'.**
* **Value Base- (IFCA & IASW) - respect, open, partnership, non judgemental, equality, inclusive, collective responsibility**

Differences:

* **Different types of Service providers.**
* **Different types of expertise, education/training;**
* **Different forms of accountability……………**

What constitutes professional status and how do we hold similarity and differences?
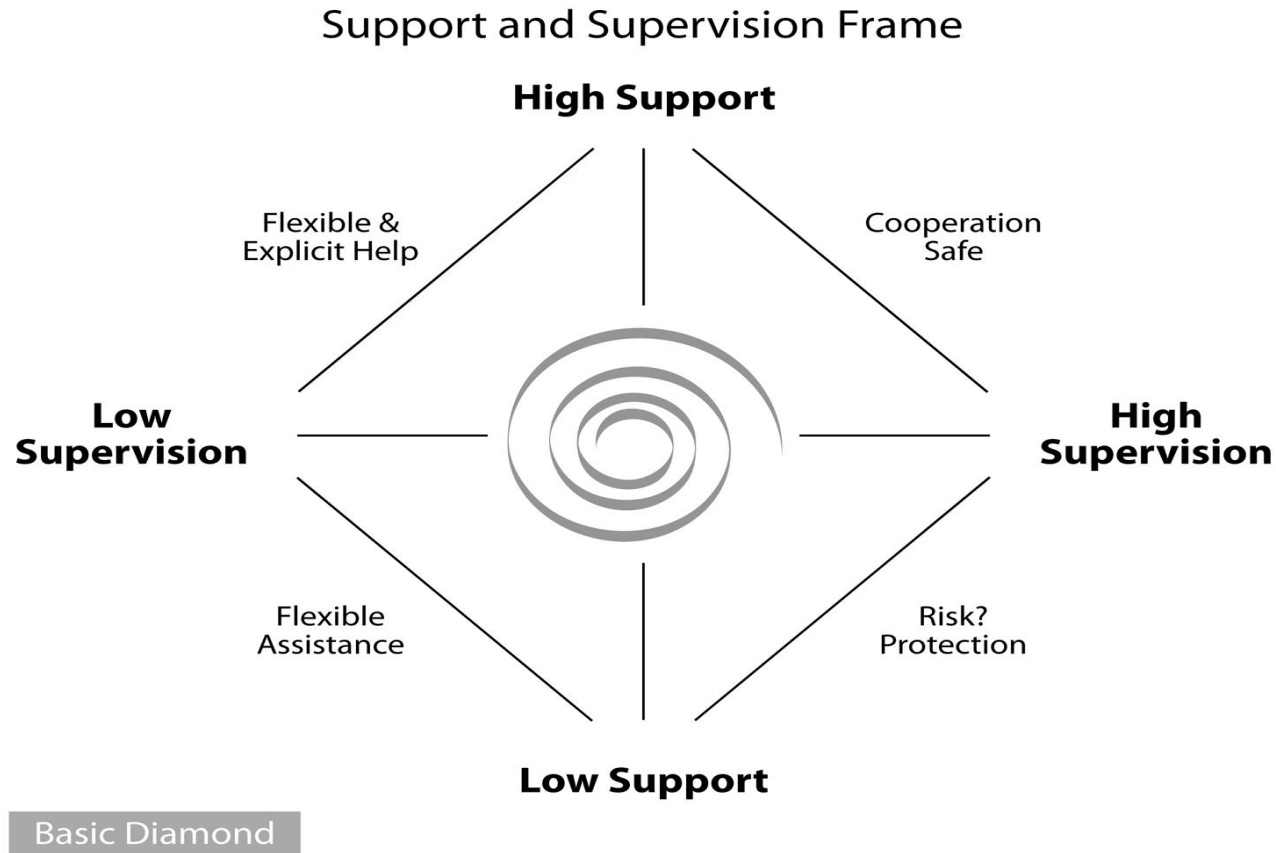
Polarities Shaping Practices in the Child Welfare System : A Continuum Perspective (Source O'Brien 2014b) –These explain the inherent tensions that exist and shape relationship.
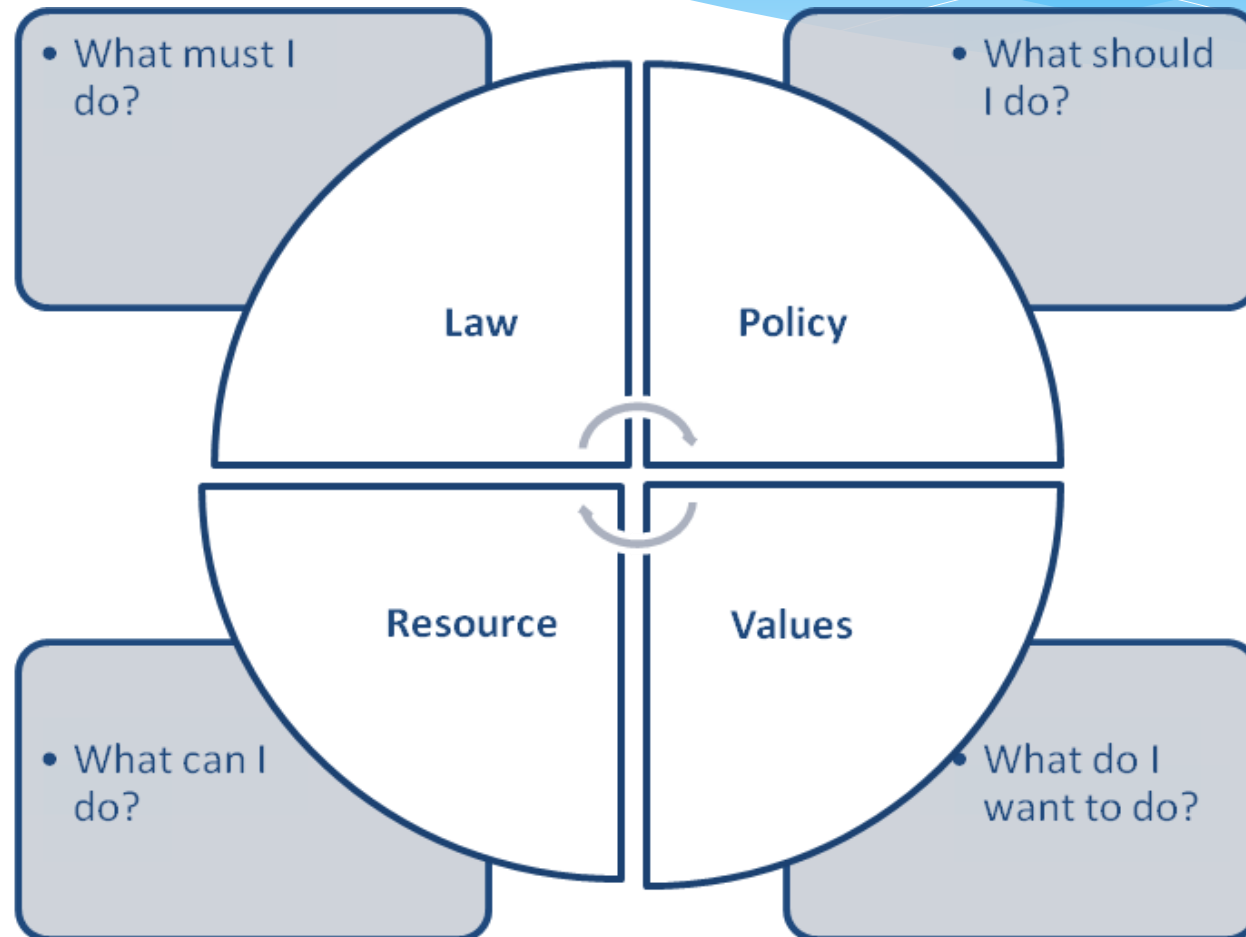
Child Protection Focus	Child & Fam Welfare Focus
Investigative / Surveillance	Engagement / Supportive
Risk Averse	Risk Sensitive (Sensible)
Danger	Safety
Legalistic / Bureaucratic / Procedural	Community Protection / Bottoms Up / Judgment
Family as Potential Threat / Pathology	Family as Protection / Strengths
Professional Centered	Family & Child Centered
Crisis Driven	Focus on Early Intervention
Certainty / Predictive	Uncertain

Support and Supervision : A Guiding Frame (Source O'Brien 2014b)

How are support and supervision needs and requirements decided upon?

Support and Supervision Frame

High Support

Flexible & Explicit Help

Cooperation Safe

Low Supervision

High Supervision

Flexible Assistance

Risk? Protection
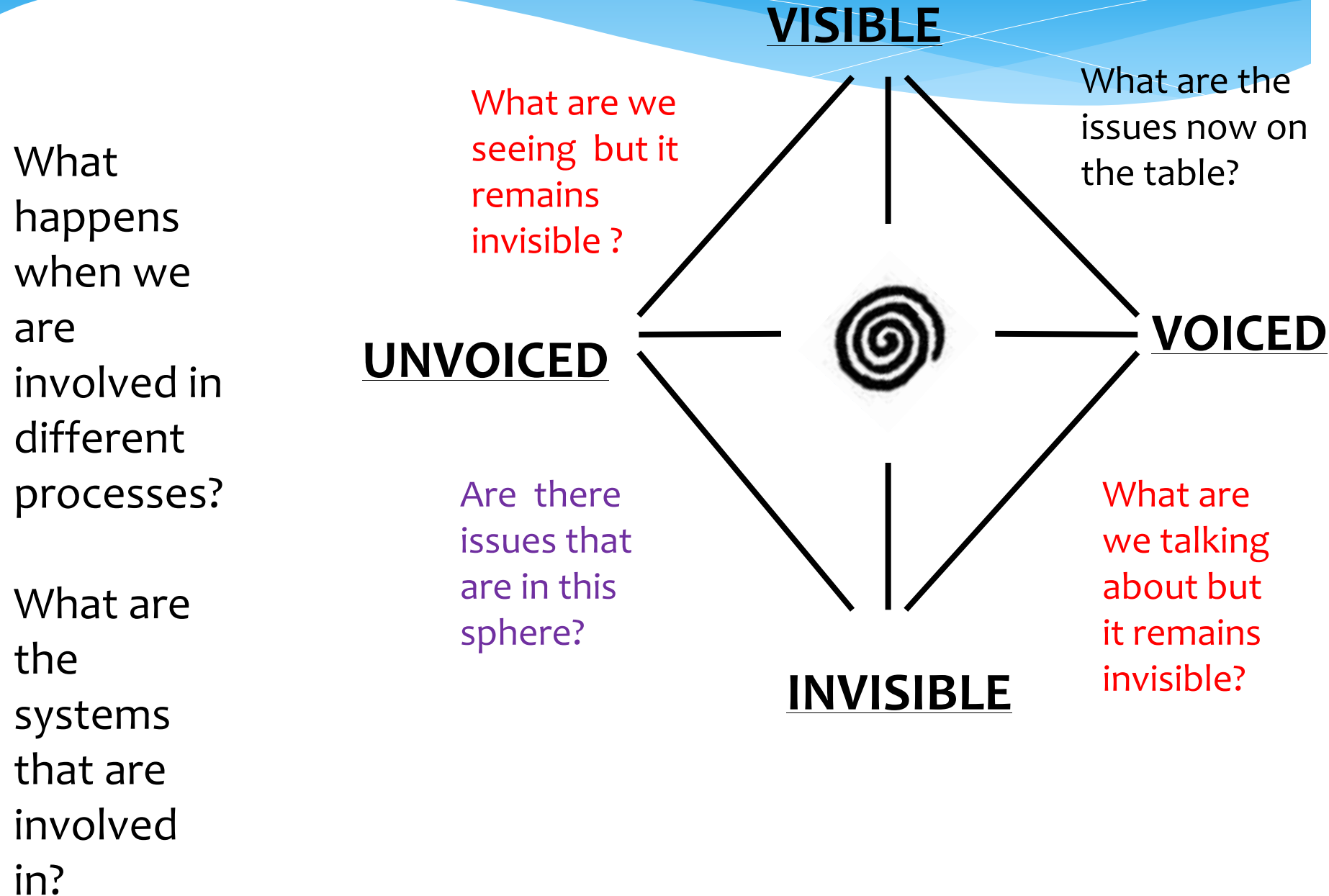
Low Support

Basic Diamond

Domains of Influence and Action (Source O'Brien 2014a)

Need to be clear as to what we can do in each domain and in turn, it helps to explain tensions and differences that arise.

Mapping Communications and Processes

VISIBLE

What are we seeing but it remains invisible ?

What are the issues now on the table?

What happens when we are involved in different processes?

What are the systems that are involved in?

UNVOICED

VOICED

Are there issues that are in this sphere?

What are we talking about but it remains invisible?

INVISIBLE

Activity in Child Welfare and Protection System. 2006 -2013
(Adapted O'Brien and Cregan 2015)

Year	Child Welfare Referrals	Child Protection Referrals	Total Number of Children in Care System	Total Number admitted to Care per Year
2006	11,579	9,461	**5,247**	**1,845**
2007	12,715	10,453	**5,307**	**2,134**
2008	12,932	11,736	**5,345**	**2,013**
2009	14,875	12,013	**5,674**	**2,372**
2010	16,452	12,825	**5,965**	**2,291**
2011	15,808	15,818	**6.160**	**2.218**
2013	22,192	19,407	**6,469**	**1,896**

All of this activity represents major demands in the system : Multiple & conflicting demands, complex decision making, enormous resource location and use etc

A number of questions to help locate each participants hopes and dreams :

Stage Two continued.

What kind of carer /social worker do I want to be : beginning stage

* What kind of carer/ professional do I want to be?

* What are the ideas that underpin this aspiration / vision

    * What are the experiences that have been instrumental in its development?

* If client/s, service providers, children and professional colleagues that I work with were asked, what might they say about how this aspiration appears vis-a-vis their experiences of my work? Do I do what I say?

* What are the opportunities and constraints that are enabling this vision to occur?

Reflective questions

* When I act in this way, what am I accepting and reinforcing and reifying?
* What do I need to challenge and or subvert?
* How might I best dissolve this situation?
* Are there 'valid truth' claims that need to be faced?
  * Are there 'awkward truths' involved in this?

Even more questions

* What are some of the common mistakes a social worker / carer sometimes make when they meet with you?
    * What are the contexts in which that can happen?
* What are the episodes it can happen around?
* What would you need to start doing differently to enable you to take a different position and / or to obtain a different outcome?
* What differences would social worker and carer experience if I was able to achieve what it is I aspire to be?

Pilot Findings

Episodes presented to participants & asked to comment on

What is working well?
What is not working so well?
What are the changes that may assist to build a more positive relationship.

Stage Three.

Pilot findings: Episodes within which relationship issues get played out.

* Support and supervision
* Education and training
* Recruitment and assessment
* Professionalism
* Confidentiality and recording
* Management of serious concerns and allegations of abuse
* Reviews
* Foster Care committees

Support / supervision –intrinsic to foster care

* On one hand focus on both ensures issues can be discussed but on the other, the rule game is not clear

* Changes needed
* Support is multi faceted from formal to informal- and need to identify various inputs /outputs . …… 24/7
* Cornerstone of the working relationship
* Improved communication, accountability for decisions made and comments passed (On both sides?)
* Better documentation of meetings, decisions & shared information. ..unintended consequences of this are?
*

Education and Training g

* *Working : Increased range or variation in training available with a greater focus on self care in recent times....geog variation*

* *Joint training but level of partnership is what?*

* *Not working*

    * *Training fatigue / instructive/ hitting various knowledge levels and needs*

* *Changes : needs led but this presents delivery challenges*

Recruitment & assessment

* **Working :** national assess framework thorough /carers understand the need
* **Not working :**
  * Delays following people up and therefore there is loss of potential carers.
  * Finding carers in areas that they are needed / international phenomena
* **Changes**
  * National and local need working conjointly
  * Use of digital media & marketing/ best resource for recruitment is word of mouth
  * Standardisation re 'suitability criteria' /eligibility criteria – levels of confusion

Work with birth families : at the core of the work.

* Working : greater emphasis and continued contact for children and their family members

* Not working : too much emphasis and is the child's voice heard sufficiently? SW and other profess privileging BP over children's voice ?

* Changes : review of access plans

* Decision making processes

Professionalism

* Clarity of what it is, how it is defined and the impact of lack of respect for different types of knowledge and experiences.

* Views dismissed by sequence of implicit communications..which can lead to carers then taking up defensive positions...escalation of conflict in the relationship

* IMPASSE..: IN WHOSE INTEREST?

* How can we build on similarity and accept inherent differences ...context of influence on all players.

Recording and confidentiality

* Working : recognition of importance & it can be used to advocate and it is a 'protection'

* Not working : time & other resources implications / covering ***; clarity re how best to do it?

* Changes : consistency required but of what?
  * Skill base to deliver?
  * Who owns the records? Legal issues……data protection

Reviews : key to decision making

* Working : Accountable space open to inspection by HIQA / quality assurance but are these systems focusing on the best issues?
* Focus on children/ young people's participation
* Not working : opportunity to focus on experience of all, not just the child (working in some areas).

* Changes : Independent chair? Child care /foster care reviews

Advocacy

* Working : it is needed to ensure needs get met
* Not working : ethical dilemmas and tensions arise and advocacy only way forward but….does organisation see action as 'disloyal'?

* Changes : Role of advocacy….is nb and how best to proceed? Individual cases / wider service…..

Foster care committee /decision making & oversight

* Working : move towards standardisations / procedures and decision making g

* Not working : move towards standardisations / procedures and decision making...a TENSION

* Changes : local and national .../ need to drive policy eg ethnicity and culture ...recruitment
* Address issues at the edge
* Role in quality assurance and case management?

Tools to assist and action needed to shape the way forward :

Stage Four.

Change direction

* Social worker and carer are able to co create a more expansive space where both can attend to the complex more fully.

* This expanded space allows both to have a more open, playful, and creative view of and stance toward the work, of making differences for children.

* Rights, Responsibilities & Principles ...context. Charter Checklist (ifca.ie)

Clarity re episodes within which 'meetings' occur

* Formal and informal meetings
* Private (invisible) and more open (visible)
* One to one- couple – family members
* Carer and birth family
* Formal meetings inclusive of range of 'professionals' ; ' carers' and family members

Skills for meetings : Be clear on your intent when making statement at meetings

* Proposal…………my proposal is

* Question……………my question is ….?

* Negative feedback………my concern is….

* Comment or opinion….my comment is….

Ways to proceed…..

* Stay solution focused
* Be clear re what you need while recognise inherent dualities involved.
* Work through to look for consensus : what do we agree on and what do we see differently?
* Asking if there are 'any loose ends' at the start of each meeting, regarding the last one.
  * State clearly what else have you found useful?

The Charter to be advanced could include

* Foster carers :
    * Are needs clear?
    * Am I seeking support when I need it?
    * Is focus on the child in my care? Am I raising issues assertively and respectfully when they arise?
    * Am I taking competing contexts of worker into account?
    * Are my issues heard and valued?

Social Workers (Charter IFCA)

* Have I shared sufficient information?
* Behaving in respectful/ courteous way? Am I making too many statements rather than asking questions?
* Am I valuing carers knowledge and including them in decision making?
* Am I supporting carer in co parenting role rather than taking over?
    * Am I using authority appropriately
* Is what I am doing promoting best interest of the child?
* Does my recording include 'foster carers issues/views etc esp if there is differences in perspective?

Unravel Concept of Partnership

* Is there time to advance a more nuanced understanding of the possibilities and limitations of partnership as a core variable to advancing the relationship?

* What can be learnt from other contexts? Eg Business partnership when there are aspects of inequality?

Ways to Evaluate Partnership Proposal:
Harvard Business Review 2015

* Ask yourself questions that may disloyal at the negotiation table
  * How have proposed partner behaved with partners similar to you?
  * What factions inside the organisation could work against your partnership? (is person doing negotiation in conflict within their organisation?)
* Evaluate partners true resources & capabilities.
* Explore options with other partners: enables you to weigh factors.
* Protect yourself through understanding egal /parameters terms of the agreement (carer contract) : personal relationship, promised, enthusiasm, good intentions not enough..what is possible to achieve?
* Trust your partner but only after you set up good clear structures & processes. Too much trust counterproductive!
* After agreement reached, expect your partner to pursue their interest & use their leverage but so can you!

Outcomes from the workshop: Participants views :

Stage Five

What was interesting re the topic.

Carers

Social Workers

* Extent of difficulties that exist but ability of group to see way forward.
* Hearing multiple views /experiences.
* Contexts of influence /systems.
* Focus on tasks could improve relationship.

* Ways in which exploration of topic was undertaken.
* Scope for team building involving all stakeholders.
* Ways in which good practices can enhance good relationship development.
* Wide variation of participants but how experiences are similar in terms of difficulties.

Key messages people are taking home

Social Workers

* Possibility of future change; realisation of volume of work to be done & willingness to progress it. .
* Awareness of influence of inherent tensions /duality.
* Task rather than role focus would help.
* Need to develop greater clarity and communication strategies.
* More work to be done to address issues.

Carers

* There is a willingness to address the issues.
* Importance of telling social workers how you are feeling, name issues & be clear what you want/need.
* How SW and FC need to work together to enhance outcomes for children.
* Social workers and carers are backbone of system.
* Good social workers exist.
* Teamwork is key but difficult.

What is needed.

Social Workers

* To have more buy in from management to address this critical issue: obtain coherent response.
* Managing risk within foster families.
* Greater focus on this topic.
* Explore what is possible in partnership.

Carers

* Much much greater focus on this topic.
* Importance of focusing on legal parameters .
* Bring all involved including children, carers and both social workers together more.
* More joint training.

Positive practices experienced by participants that have enhanced working relationship :

Social Workers

* Rapport building (finding the positive).
* Active Listening.
* Consistency
* Mutual respect
* Pick up the phone and check in.
* Been prepared to advocate for carers /child

Carers

* Good placement matching suited to our family/ avoid putting pressure on.
* If there is difficulties, say it.
* Trust is key.
* Seeing team as triangle of carers, social workers and birth family in respect of child.
* Recognising that carers are eyes and ears for agency re child.

CONTINUED : Positive practices experienced by participants that have enhanced working relationship :

Social Workers

* Advance planning and anticipation of issues.
* Greater cooperation and working together of child and cares social worker.

Carers

* Following through on promises
* Good concrete planning.
* Listening attentively.
* Been prepared to have agency distance when everything is stable.
* Mature social workers who use common sense as well as book knowledge.

The end……

We hope that this topic will get the attention that it requires moving forward. Thanks to all the people, carers, social workers and organisation who have shared their expertise to enable us to bring this work to your attention.

References

O'Brien, V. & Cregan, M (2015) Fostering the future: A change agenda in the provision of alternative care. *Social Work in Ireland,* (Eds) Christie, A; Quin, S; & Walsh, P. London : Palgrave.

O'Brien, V.; (2014a) Navigating Kinship Networks with the Fifth Province: *Human Systems* 25, 58-76.

O'Brien, V (2014b) Navigating Child Welfare and Protection in Ireland with the Help of the Fifth Province, in *Feedback, Journal of Family Therapy: Special Issue on Supervision,* pp 91-117.