



Centre for excellence
for looked after children in Scotland



Attachment Matters for All: Executive Summary

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Introduction

In 2011 the Scottish Children's Reporter Administration (SCRA) published research into care and permanence planning for looked after children. This identified long delays in achieving permanence, multiple placements and the adverse effects of these on children's attachments. Potential long-term effects on individuals of poor attachment experiences in infancy and childhood include an increased risk of violent and anti-social behaviour, mental and physical health difficulties and a reduced capacity to parent their own children. Attachment-informed practice can ameliorate the long-term effects of early adversity. The Scottish Government responded to the SCRA research by commissioning the Centre for Excellence for Looked After Children in Scotland (CELCIS) and Scottish Attachment in Action (SAIA) to map attachment training and attachment-focused practice in Scotland.

Methodology

Information was collected through surveys, phone interviews, individual and group interviews, documentary analysis and attendance at relevant professional meetings. Qualifying courses across children's services were systematically identified and information about the content of courses was requested from universities and SQA. Identification of other types of training or learning opportunities and examples of good practice were collected from practitioners and managers across agencies in a pragmatic way using professional links and networks.

Findings

Learning and development

With the exception of social work there was little evidence of a systematic focus on attachment in qualifying courses. Moreover, few courses had opportunities for different professionals to undertake shared learning at the prequalifying stage. There were good examples of postgraduate courses that focused on attachment. Although within social work courses attachment was said to be a core theoretical framework, a strong view, expressed across a range of respondents, was that many social workers, both newly-qualified and more experienced practitioners, were poorly informed about attachment theory and that it was infrequently used within assessments or interventions.

The provision of attachment-based CPD varied from examples of well-planned and coherent inter-agency programmes to occasional short briefings for single professional groups. For certain key professionals such as teachers, health practitioners and those involved in legal decision making, attachment-focused development opportunities were rare.

Where attachment-focused learning and development opportunities were making significant impact on practice and outcomes, this was as a result of careful embedding of knowledge and skills within organisations through reflective supervision, external consultancy and the creation of policies and structures that were congruent with an attachment-based approach.

Direct Practice

Although there were some examples of excellent attachment-informed practice among professionals from all disciplines, this was often as a result of a special project that attracted very well-qualified and committed staff and could maintain some degree of protection against external bombardment. Such projects can be vulnerable to funding cuts or changes of key personnel. More common was a description of front-line practitioners whose knowledge and competence was eroded through the relentless and irreconcilable demands of severely distressed children and families and target- driven bureaucracies.

Support to parent and carers

The key factor in enabling children to recover from trauma is their relationship with their direct caregivers. There is insufficient emotional or reflective support offered to those providing direct care to traumatised, distressed and challenging children in their task of helping children develop secure and healing attachments. Where this is systematically provided, placements are more stable and enduring and children and caregivers happier and more successful.

Organisational and political culture

Although there was overwhelming support for an enhanced focus on attachment-informed practice, respondents consistently identified serious inhibiting factors that prevented the development of a coherent attachment-sensitive approach to vulnerable children and families. These included: overwhelming and conflicting demands within organisations; risk-averse policies and attitudes; target-driven rather than relational management; excessive bureaucracy; inter-agency difficulties; and a lack of political will to place the needs of children at the heart of policy. A need to create a paradigm shift in attitudes to children throughout Scottish society was frequently mentioned.

Outcomes

Most professionals involved with children and young people share a passionate commitment to their welfare and aspirations for their future. Far too frequently, however, the lack of an attachment-sensitive approach and culture means that professional intervention leads to even more disrupted and damaged attachments and badly managed transitions for children while they are looked after and as they approach independence.

Next steps

This report will inform the development of an action plan that will underpin the continued work of LACSIG in collaboration with CELCIS, SAIA and other key partners. The focus will be on the dissemination of these findings and the future engagement of stakeholders to facilitate a strong systemic embedding of attachment-informed practice within all children's services and positive futures for our looked after children.

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About CELCIS

CELCIS is the Centre for Excellence for Looked After Children in Scotland. Together with partners, we are working to improve the lives of all looked after children in Scotland. We do so by providing a focal point for the sharing of knowledge and the development of best practice, by providing a wide range of services to improve the skills of those working with looked after children, and by placing the interests of children at the heart of our work.

For more information

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