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Kim Corless

Sharon Horan

Barbara Kirkpatrick

Nicola Crocker

Maura O'Donoghue

See next page for additional authors

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The Key Attributes of a Successful Relationship with Service Users in Family Support: Views of Family Support Workers

Authors

Kim Corless, Sharon Horan, Barbara Kirkpatrick, Nicola Crocker, Maura O'Donoghue, and Veronika Steiner

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Existing research on family support suggests that key to the family's engagement and satisfaction is the family's perception of the quality of the relationship established with their assigned support worker (McArthur & Thompson, 2011; Mason, 2012). The research reported here explores the views of the other partner in this relationship, the family support worker. Two experienced family support workers were interviewed about their views of what were the key attributes of a successful relationship with the families they worked with. The data was thematically analysed and three themes identified. There were overcoming barriers; skills needed to build a successful working relationship; approaches to working that were considered to be successful. These findings concur with those researching the family's viewpoint suggesting compatibility in beliefs about successful working relationships between the two parties involved.

Literature Review

As families in need of support have complex and multi-faceted needs integrated services that provide a co-ordinated and collaborative approach have been found to be effective (Cleek, Wofsy, Boyd-Franklin, Munfy & Howell, 2012; Mc Arthur & Thomson, 2011). Fordham, Gibson and Bowes (2011, p.648), from questionnaires completed by 130 families who had a child with a disability report that while "respectful and supportive care" was frequently provided by professionals, the provision of information was infrequent which impacted on families' feelings of empowerment. Integrated services address the multiple range of issues with which families may present. Practical issues such as housing and entitlements can be addressed alongside other presenting issues such as substance abuse and mental health in a way that can reduce duplication of services. Gaps in services can also be addressed through this approach and appointments can be scheduled at convenient times and in convenient locations (McArthur & Thompson, 2011). Families have reported a stronger sense of empowerment through

involvement with these programmes and greater levels of engagement in services have been noted (*ibid*).

McArthur and Thompson (2011, p.72) also stress that in order for family support services to be effective it is important that family support programmes are “underpinned by theory”, “work in partnership with families” and recognise “the expertise of families regarding their own lives”. It is also important that they take a child-centred family focused approach and provide support for the length of time required by each individual family. In addition Shute (2008, p. 52) argues that family interventions must be seen to be “voluntary, supportive and non-judgemental”, as well as emphasising the strengths the family have and take account of the context in which he family lives.

While research suggests the importance of integration and working from a strengths based perspective it has been found that key to the success of programmes is the quality of the relationship established between the family and the support worker assigned to them. Mc Arthur and Thomson (2011) found that where families expressed dissatisfaction with a programme it was mainly due to a poor relationship with the case co–ordinator. This is echoed by Mason (2012), who, in interviews with 15 parents who attended a support service, found that when the relationship with the family support worker was viewed positively the service was seen to be of value regardless of whether the children remained with the family or were taken into care. Mason (2012) examines the elements of positive relationships between families and support workers from parents’ perspectives. Identified were communication in a respectful way; reliability and honesty; trustworthiness; understanding the viewpoint of parents and provision of practical support.

With regard to the skills of family support workers having active listening skills seen as important by families. Mason (2012, p.373) concludes that “*how* the worker carries out his or her work with the parent is as important as *what* he or she actually does”. From a family perspective, professionals relating to them “on a human level” were integral to a successful outcome Families felt better about using the service when they found staff to be approachable. Some service users reported being able to extrapolate from a positive relationship with a professional to other relationships in their lives (McArthur & Thomson 2011, p.75).

The research reviewed has highlighted the views of service users but this research will focus on the views of professionals engaged with families about what contributes to a successful relationship.

Design

Two family support workers were individually interviewed. They had twelve and five years' experience respectively. Semi structured interviews were used to enable exploration of their views of what constitutes the key attributes of a successful relationship as a family support worker. Interviews were audio recorded. Participants were asked the following questions:

1. Can you give an example of a family that you had a good relationship with?
2. What was it that you think contributed to that relationship to make it a good one?
3. Think of a relationship that was not so successful- what made that relationship unsuccessful?
4. Can you think of a relationship that did not start out well but improved- what was the factor that changed it?
5. What do you think are the key attributes that a worker needs to have to engage a family?
6. What do you think the families want from you?
7. What might the potential barriers to a good relationship be?
8. From your work experience what would you say is the best approach in building a successful or constructive relationship with service users?

Ethics

As the participants were members of the research group and contributed to the development of the data collection questions, they were fully aware of what their participation entailed.

Participants were assured that the audio recordings would be deleted after analysis, which was done. Participants were assured that they would not be identified in the findings as quotes used would not be attributed to a specific person.

Data analysis

The researchers, including the participant researchers listened to the audio recordings several times and noted common themes relevant to the research question. Illustrative quotes were noted verbatim.

Discussion

Three themes were identified in interviews with the participants in relation to the research question what do family support workers view as key attributes in successful relationships with families?

Theme 1: Overcoming barriers

Both participants stated that lack of clarity on behalf of the referring agency may create inaccurate or unrealistic expectations on the part of the families as to the exact purpose and role of the agency. The level of commitment required from the family can be an obstacle to initial and ultimate success if they have not been made aware of this requirement. This echoes findings of Mason, (2012). Also necessary to maintain clarity of purpose is workers' own self-awareness and reflective practice and supervision.

In terms of an overall link with the family support agency, both participants highlighted the importance of families engaging with more than one worker to mitigate against the effects of one worker being unavailable, which could result in disengagement. Rather than contradicting the findings of Cleek et al. (2012), this actually reinforces the importance of a co-ordinated team approach.

The participants also spoke of the importance of keeping their own expectations realistic in terms of the capacity for change that a family may possess. Also highlighted was families' prior experience of working with other professionals or agencies which can hinder their ability to engage with their present service if they have viewed this as negative.

Theme 2: Qualities and skills of the family support worker that contribute to successful relationships

Qualities and skills listed were: warmth, trust, suitability (matching the professional appropriately with the client to take account of ethnicity, life experience, cultural background, staff experience), ability to connect, openness, ability to relate, a non-judgemental attitude, empathy, genuineness, ability to meet the family: “where they are at” through appropriate communication skills and the importance of being “[...] mindful of strength of the family”, as well as “being honest.”

Skills particularly identified as contributing to a successful relationship were: active listening, ability to engage, being real, patience, getting the balance right between empowerment and helping, respect and sincerity, all qualities identified by McArthur and Thomson (2011). Having these skills was stated to be particularly important as: “There may be no one else that is hearing them”.

Theme 3: Successful approaches

Common with Aldridge et al. (2009) the participants identified working from a strengths based perspective as essential to a successful approach as well as encouraging families to take ownership of their own journey. As one participant put it: “[...] enabling, standing back, and encouraging them to do tasks themselves”.

Although perseverance and commitment were said to be important, the participants also emphasised that there must be flexibility that takes into account each individual family’s needs and capacity to change as “No one way of working suits every family”.

As well as stating the need for flexibility between families, participants noted that different approaches are appropriate for different members of the family. Engaging men in the service was seen important but sometimes difficult and requiring a different approach. This was seen as being due to family support services being dominated by females, both workers and service users:

Working in a predominantly female dominated profession with a predominantly female client group as primary carers of children, I have learned that fathers can often be overlooked and excluded by us care agencies. This can be as simple as consent forms or information letters from the care agency being addressed to only the mother, despite dad living within the

family home. [...] We engage with mam as she often is the one at home, the children as her priority, but I know in our agency it was years before we actively began to consider how we could engage the fathers. Dads needed to be invited, with the expectation that they would engage as a support for their children, with an active role as an agent of change for their family. Women will chat and connect over a pot of tea. Men need something different. I have learned that men often don't see the unique role they have in their role as dads.

This area was highlighted as being particularly in need of further exploration.

In conclusion this small scale research piece sought the views of two family support workers about what makes the relationship with families successful. The findings echo previous studies carried out from a service user perspective and appear to indicate that support workers and service users identify similar values and skills as being key attributes of successful relationships.

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