Creating Light Bulb Moments

An evaluation of the impact of Reducing Parental Conflict training on the practice of early intervention workers in child and family services

KATIE CRAMPHORN

"light bulb moment"

a moment of sudden inspiration, revelation, or recognition

In the workplace:

When I first started the course, I didn't necessarily see how it would fit into an education setting because a lot of the examples and a lot of the work was based around the work that early help practitioners (in the local authority) might do. That was the **light bulb moment** that I thought, "Well, if that works for families in that setting, why wouldn't it work in our setting?

- School Based Practitioner

In the family:

[Talking about parental conflict]

I said to her, "Sometimes you're both attackers [when you argue],so that's what you need to work on". It's the first time she's had a bit of a **light bulb moment** about herself... Then she went, "I'll talk to him about it."

- Local Authority Family Support Worker

Acknowledgments

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We would like to express our thanks to the learners for their commitment to their professional development, their hard work in completing their training and putting it into practice, and for sharing their experiences with us so that we can share our learning more widely. This learning also would not have been possible without the support from the learners' managers and their organisations.

We would like to share our gratitude to Clare Joyce (Interface Enterprises) for her dedication to providing learners with the best possible experience during their time completing their qualification, and for her valued insights which have helped develop our thinking locally. Additionally, we'd like to acknowledge the work of our local trainers, Pauline Banks, Martin Todd and Richard Wrighton in delivering 'How to Argue Better' to the local workforce.

Last but not least, we would like to thank our funders, the Early Action Neighbourhood Fund (Comic Relief, The Big Lottery Fund and Esmee Fairbairn) for their investment in systems change in Hartlepool.

Contents Page

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Background

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In the five years the Healthy Relationships Partnership has been working to change the way things are done in Hartlepool to support parental relationships and reduce parental conflict we have been on a learning journey to understand what works and what doesn't. There is a growing body of evidence that establishes the impact that frequent, intense and unresolved parental conflict has on the wellbeing and life chances of children (Harold et al, 2016). Despite this evidence, creating a culture where parental conflict is addressed early is complex for a number of reasons (Pote et al, 2019). We learned from parents locally that they wanted to talk about conflict in their relationship with people they already trusted, rather than accessing specialist relationship support services (Cramphorn, 2018). Their feedback pushed us to understand how we could enable professionals already working with families, in a range of settings and contexts, to be able to offer help when parents are experiencing difficulties in their relationship with their child's other parent.

At the beginning of our learning journey some practitioners spoke about the reservations they had about intervening with parental conflict. Our team had informal conversations with practitioners who shared their fear of opening a metaphorical "can of worms" by asking parents questions about their relationship. Many of them shared that they didn't feel skilled or confident enough to approach this issue with parents. Some weren't sure if it was their job or their business to talk to parents about their relationships. These perceptions posed a barrier to changing how parental conflict is approached by the early intervention sector. We knew that if our project were to be successful we needed to prompt a change in how practitioners were thinking about parental conflict. We recognised that we needed a way of helping practitioners to have a light bulb moment about why reducing parental conflict was important and what role they, as a professional, played in the agenda.

Our hypothesis was that we could enable those light bulb moments by investing in multi-agency workforce development. Through this investment we aimed to understand if, and how, training for professionals could change their practice and give them the skills and confidence to respond and intervene. Two programmes of training were launched. Firstly, a wider workforce approach of a one-day training 'How to Argue Better' (a course developed by One Plus One)[1]. Secondly, a smaller cohort completing a Level 4 qualification in Working with Children, Individuals and Families[2] over a six-month period.

The investment from our partnership predates the 2019/20 Reducing Parental Conflict programme by the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP, 2019). The DWP programme includes funding for practitioner training. As outlined in our Summary of Key Learning, there are important conditions to be considered regarding workforce development training, without which impact of the training may be lessened. This report is useful for those coordinating and leading workforce development as part of the Reducing Parental Conflict programme. However, it has relevance to anyone with an interest in workforce development and early intervention. This report details our evaluation process and subsequent learning journey of investment in workforce development. Our key points of learning will be shared and our recommendations for ensuring that training results in sustained changes in practice is presented.

[1] Information about 'How to Argue Better' training is available in Appendices 1a
[2] Information about the Level 4 qualification is available in Appendices 1b

Summary of Key Learning

Investment in workforce development can be effective in enabling multi-agency early intervention practitioners to recognise and respond to destructive parental conflict.

For the majority of practitioners, participation in the training was successful in encouraging them to think and act differently to respond to parental conflict. The investment being realised however is dependent on practitioners having clarity about their role and how this includes working with the parental relationships with a view to reducing parental conflict. One of the barriers we identified was practitioner reluctance to engage with issues relating to relationship distress as it may resonate with their own lived experience. Peer and management support were shown to enable the practitioner to be aware of, and contain any of their own emotional response.

There are some key conditions that need to be in place if learning acquired in the classroom is to be applied into ongoing practice.

These system conditions include the presence of an organisational culture that considers learning and development an essential part of the practitioner role. This would be illustrated by routine opportunities for reflection, appreciative enquiry and peer learning, management supervision that builds on training, and services that incorporate learning and changes in practice into their models of service delivery.

There are benefits to the wider children's services system in terms of demand reduction.

Safe intervention and containment of parental conflict is possible in early intervention services when practitioners are confident to attend to the quality of the parental relationship. Normalising conversations about the quality of the parental relationship in universal and community services can help to destigmatise the issue and promote parent help seeking from practitioners in community and early intervention roles, potentially preventing escalation.

The Learning Journey

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We began our learning journey by developing a hypothesis. Our hypothesis was that workforce development could help practitioners to develop their skills and confidence to work with parental conflict. By exploring the experiences of 12 practitioners occupying roles in the local authority, schools and the voluntary sector, this report documents our journey to answer these central questions;

1. **How can investment in workforce development be effective in enabling multi-agency early intervention practitioners to recognise and respond to destructive parental conflict?**

2. **Is accredited classroom-based training the right method of Workforce Development, and are there any lessons for future provision of workforce training and development?**

3. **What are the system conditions that need to be in place to allow the workforce development training to be embedded into practice?**

We aimed to explore these research questions using a semi-structured interview research methodology within this research process:

STEP 1: IDENTIFYING THE TRAINING OFFER:
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The training offer chosen reflected what we believed to be the highest quality, most credible training available in this area of work, based on the existing evaluations conducted by their providers. There were two strands to the offer;

Firstly, an opportunity for a large number of practitioners working in early intervention roles in schools, community organisations, the local authority and more to attend a one day training of 'How to Argue Better'. This aimed to give as many practitioners as possible within the system the basic skills to have conversations with parents about the quality of their relationship. Secondly, for a much smaller number of multi-agency practitioners, an opportunity to gain a Level 4 qualification in working with children, individuals and families. The course took place over 6 months with a mix of classroom learning and portfolio building and gave practitioners more in depth skills and knowledge about engaging with families, with parental conflict being a key thread throughout the course content. It is their experiences that our evaluation has focused on.

Further details about the specifics of these training offers, including the learning objectives and structure, are outlined in the appendices of this report.

STEP 2: RECRUITING LEARNERS:

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Both training opportunities were advertised across our online social media platforms and website as well as by email to local organisations and through direct targetting carried out by members of our team. Practitioners signed themselves up for 'How to Argue Better' training by email or phone.

Due to the commitment needed for the Level 4 qualification and the limited number of places available, a briefing session was held with the trainer leading the course so that practitioners could ask questions and understand if the opportunity was right for them. Their managers were also required to attend as we believed they were a big component of practitioners embedding their learning into practice. Managers were also required to sign off on their involvement due to the time they would need to be out of work for classroom based learning. Interested practitioners then completed an expression of interest form to outline how they thought the course would benefit them, their organisation and the families they worked with.

STEP 3: COLLECTING A BASELINE OF PRACTICE:

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Prior to the roll out of the Level 4 training, a baseline of practice was gathered. This involved a semi-structured interview, which lasted around one hour per learner. Learners brought along images to help explain their perception of their role and were asked to share the experiences of their work, including of supporting parental relationships/conflict. All interviews were carried out by one interviewers and audio recorded and transcribed for our thematic analysis.

We wanted to gain a rich, in depth understanding from learners undertaking the Level 4 qualification of how learning from training was used in their work with families. We hoped by carrying out in depth qualitative interviews with learners we would be able to understand if training actually makes a difference to practice and therefore if it is a worthwhile investment for organisations.

STEP 4: COLLECTING OUR LEARNING:

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Practitioners were interviewed upon completion of the Level 4 qualification to understand what they had learned, how their practice may have changed and what impact they felt this had on them as individuals and the families they supported. This was again an hour long semi-structured interview. All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed for our thematic analysis.

This report will focus on the anonymised experiences of 12 of the 14 learners who completed the Level 4 qualification between October 2018 and June 2019. 2 of the learners who completed the qualification chose not to take part in the final interview. The roles of the 12 interviewed learners were:

- 3 Local Authority Early Help Family Support Workers
- 1 Local Authority Early Help Principal Practitioner
- 1 Voluntary Sector Support Worker
- 7 School Based Pastoral Staff

Firstly, to provide some context about why it was important that the training was a multi-agency offer, it's useful to set the scene of 'Early Help' in Hartlepool. Hartlepool Borough Council have two 'Locality Teams'. These teams are multi-disciplinary, consisting of Family Support Workers, Health Visitors and Community Nursery Nurses. They provide both universal and targeted early intervention provision to families in the area. In 2015 the 'Early Help Assessment (EHA)' replaced the previous 'Common Assessment Framework (CAF)' as a tool to assess the strengths and needs of families. This tool was intended to be for multi-agency use, however it is still not widely used outside of the local authority and not everyone has access to the online platform, the Early Help Module. Previous analysis and anecdotal evidence tell us that assessments completed by practitioners outside the local authority tend to be for the purpose of referring families to access local authority provision. Whilst there are many agencies

in Hartlepool providing important early intervention to children and families there is still a perception that 'Early Help' is the responsibility and remit of the local authority Locality Teams, who are often incorrectly considered and referred to as a statutory service by practitioners outside of the local authority, in line with Social Care.

Unlike the Social Care profession, practitioners working in the Early Help/Early Intervention sector often arrive at their roles through a variety of career and education paths, as opposed to undertaking a specific standard of training. There is no specification across the sector of the capabilities needed and training that should be undertaken. Consequently, to accurately test our hypothesis of how workforce development could develop practice around parental conflict it was important that the qualification supported development of generic practice skills to ensure all practitioners had a shared foundation skillset. For example, an important skill underpinning parental conflict intervention is how practitioners engage parents, an area that some practitioners report that they find difficult, particularly those in roles where they perceive their focus to be on the child. Developing this skill is vital to enabling reduction of parental conflict. If practitioners can't engage parents in a conversation about how things are for them and their family at that time, then specific knowledge about parental conflict is unlikely to ever be used to enable positive changes in the family.

Our partnership invested in a training product that, following an appraisal of accredited training available nationally, we knew to be a quality offer based on previously completed evaluations carried out by the training provider. **Our report and learning is therefore not focused on the quality of the training, but on how training can result in practitioners working differently to support parental relationships and what other factors influence the likelihood that they will do this.** The opportunity we had to have in depth interviews with this cohort of practitioners, both before and after their participation in training, offers a unique insight into how training can enable changes in practice and the wider considerations and context needed for this to happen.

Enabling Practitioners to have Light Bulb Moments

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The absence of assessment of the quality of the parental relationship in Early Help Assessments evidenced that practitioners were not addressing parental conflict. Managers and practitioners were also telling us that their focus was the child and primary caregiver. Many didn't have reducing parental conflict on their agenda. We identified a number of issues that might have prevented practitioners engaging with this agenda, and a potential solution in the form of a workforce development offer. We needed to understand how successful our proposed solution could be in addressing those barriers and creating 'light bulb moments' around parental conflict intervention. We recognised that, to begin with, we needed to understand our cohort of learner's thoughts and feelings about parental conflict and therefore speaking to them prior to their participation in the training was essential to our learning process. In this section we will present some of the key perceptions and practice around parental conflict prior to training, some of which were preventing practitioners from engaging with the agenda in their work with families.

UNDERSTANDING THE MEANING OF THE TERMS 'PARENTAL RELATIONSHIPS' AND 'PARENTAL CONFLICT'

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'Parental conflict' is a term widely used in specialist relationship services, and within the evidence base, however we have found that it is not a term used by practitioners or parents. In our initial interviews with practitioners there was no shared understanding of what the terms 'parental relationships' and 'parental conflict' meant. There were a number of interpretations of these terms. 'Parental relationships' were interpreted

by some to be the relationship between a parent and their child. There was also confusion around which types of adult relationships constituted the 'parental relationship'. Practitioners questioned if the parental relationship covered grandparents and carers and felt that this could be very complex depending on the family circumstances. 'Parental conflict' was mainly interpreted as domestic violence and therefore associated with the need for involvement of specialist services. As a result of the range of interpretations of these terms there was a need to establish within the interviews "When I say parental relationship/conflict, what does that mean to you?". To create a shared understanding with the learners it was necessary to explain what those terms meant to us. Parental relationships alluded to the relationship between parents or guardians/carers. Parental conflict referred to intense, frequent and unresolved non-violent disagreements between parents or guardians/carers. Prior to these interviews, we assumed that professionals would use and understand these terms in the same way we used and understood them. Learning that assumptions must be tested in order to form a solid foundation for development has been massively useful to wider work with other professionals, parents and communities.

"IS IT MY JOB?": CHANGING PRACTITIONER PERCEPTIONS OF THEIR ROLE AND RESPONSIBILITIES

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Our first interviews with practitioners began by discussing their roles, as they saw them at that time. The learners within the group had a wide range of roles and responsibilities, but the predominant view was that their roles were focused on intervention with children, not parents or guardians. At the time practitioners showed a high level of understanding of the impact of issues in the family on children but generally expressed that they would only respond to issues presented by the children, such as poor behaviour. They tended to refer parents to other agencies for support relating to issues experienced by the adults in the family. For many there was a lack of understanding of what other services could provide and an assumption that these services were more skilled or able to support parents. This underpinned their behaviour of referring families onwards, rather than containing and intervening themselves. The

opportunity the training gave for multi-agency discussion and relationship building facilitated increased understanding amongst practitioners of the work being carried out by other agencies. Sharing information in this way changed the perspectives of some practitioners who realised that they were capable of doing the work being done by the agencies they referred to. Relationship building also created greater empathy between the practitioners. They identified that they were more aware of other professional's responsibilities and wanted to do more to think about how agencies could support each other.

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> Because of what's going on in (local authority) Early Help, the threshold is higher, so we're having to do even more. It's thinking about who we can access now as opposed to the family support worker looking for those things. It's having the confidence to know, "Well actually, we can do that." We don't need Early Help to do that for us, we can do it ourselves, and we do.
>
> - Parent Support Advisor
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Many early intervention practitioners' years of experience comes from working in child focused roles. For some this can result in feelings of not being skilled enough to provide support or intervention to adults or feeling like this work is outside of their remit. The "working with families" component of the qualification was important to attempt to build skills to work with the wider family and empower learners to re-define their roles as family focused early intervention practitioners. The majority of learners in roles outside of the local authority felt empowered by the training to work with families in ways they wouldn't have previously. Increasing confidence will reduce pressure on local authority services as practitioners now report they recognise that this is within their remit. As a result, they now appropriately support families themselves without referring to local authority services. All practitioners reported greater confidence

approaching conversations with parents about their relationship as a result of the qualification, with almost all practitioners revealing that their roles had shifted to be more family focused. Most practitioners were actively considering how they could gather perspectives from multiple family members in order to build up a more complete picture of what life is like for the family, and subsequently lead to more tailored and impactful support.

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> When I was doing a family tree [before], I would speak to the Mum or the carer when they came in and then I'd get what the issues were. I wouldn't have normally gone and looked at the people around the child who have an impact on that child and who are involved in that child's life so much. But now I do.
>
> - Parent Support Advisor
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Reflections from learners highlighted many examples of work with families following the qualification, which evidenced a distinct change in practice around reducing parental conflict. This change was particularly significant amongst practitioners working in schools, with the majority of school-based learners expressing that they had undergone a big shift in their approach to working with parents. They hoped that this new way of working could be successful in addressing children's presenting behavioural and mental wellbeing issues at an earlier stage. Practitioners reflected that, as a result of them completing the course, the parents they worked with would increasingly feel that support wasn't just for their children, but for them too.

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I think they will see that we're not going to judge them, that we are here to help. We want to help them because to help them we are helping the children. We can't separate the children from the parents. (...) Before we did the training we always thought - we're education. This is having an impact on education, but it's knowing where our remit ends. Now, I think, well it doesn't [end].

- Parent Support Advisor

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The realisation that addressing parental conflict was key to ensuring children are able to thrive and reach their potential signified a light bulb moment for many of the practitioners, who previously would have thought this agenda wasn't relevant to them in their role. Practitioners were beginning to understand that working with issues within the family and not just the issues presented by children was a key component of ensuring improved outcomes for children. Conversations about parental relationships were still recognised as potentially difficult to approach, but for those who embraced the agenda, as a result of training, it was seen as important that professionals see past their initial discomfort and work to address this issue.

The training gave many of the learners a refreshed view of their role and their own personal potential to support parents, not just children. Reframing whose 'job' it is to support parental relationships helps widen the avenues into early intervention support for those who need it and creates capacity to support families and reduce parental conflict outside of the local authority. As a result, we believe it is likely parents will be able to access support when they are having issues in their relationship at a much earlier stage, preventing escalation of issues into crises and the need for involvement of specialist and statutory services parents tell us they want to avoid.

"IS IT MY BUSINESS?": CHANGING PRACTITIONER'S PERCEPTION THAT ASKING QUESTIONS ABOUT PARENTAL RELATIONSHIPS IS 'OVERSTEPPING'

Changing perceptions of if it is someone's job to approach parental conflict was one hurdle for us to overcome. Interviews with practitioners seemed to reflect that this was a logical process, that as a result of looking at the evidence and establishing the link between supporting parents and improving outcomes for children, addressing parental conflict had begun to make logical sense. Another hurdle to overcome was more emotional in nature. Some practitioners expressed fear or discomfort about approaching parental conflict. Consistent with feedback gathered from a much wider range of practitioners, the learners expressed concerns about having 'difficult conversations'. The lack of confidence around having difficult conversations with parents led to some practitioners reporting they didn't feel able to challenge parents or ask questions where this was necessary to change thinking or behaviour. **Many of the practitioners questioned if it was their place to ask questions or if they would be overstepping a boundary which would lead to parents being upset, angry or lodging a formal complaint.** A metaphor that has been used repeatedly amongst practitioners to describe asking questions about parental relationships in our Partnerships five-year lifetime is, 'opening a can of worms'. This metaphor reflects the fear of not knowing what parents may share and what the consequences of that could be. For some learners, prior to undertaking the qualification, there was a fear that parents would disclose something that, as a practitioner, they felt unable to deal with. A small number feared that asking parents questions could make things worse. For us, the 'can of worms' has come to signify a major challenge in changing practice. We have recognised that practitioners must be supported to not fear asking questions about parental relationships and that they must feel confident and skilled that once they ask those questions they are able to safely respond to what is inside of the 'can'.

The training offer needed to address and reduce this fear and discomfort. Practitioners reported that the training was successful in doing this. They felt more comfortable talking about parental conflict and the majority more confident in the belief that it was their business to ask about relationships so that they could offer support. For many this was as a result of feeling they now had the skills to support parents experiencing conflict once the 'can of worms' had been opened. This change in perception reduced practitioners reported reluctance to approach the subject.

> I'm conscious of parental conflict as something that might sit behind some behaviours that we see in school now, where I wouldn't have been before. I wouldn't have even thought about it. It's about trying to look for the signs of it. It's made me much more comfortable with exploring that with parents. I'm happy to have that conversation.
>
> - Parent Support Advisor

Reducing the fear of opening the can of worms also led to an understanding of parental relationships and parental conflict on a more human level as opposed to professional or theoretical. Rather than expressing fear of what parents could potentially disclose, a number of the practitioners were able to discuss parental conflict. Some felt comfortable to share their own experiences to make these conversations more about genuine care and support. This is revisited in the later section **What is a Helpful Response?** These practitioners hoped that approaching conversations in this way would reduce the likelihood that parents would perceive these questions as professional intrusion and have a response of "It's none of your business". If parents are able to have these conversations with professionals across the early intervention system when they have even minor concerns or issues practitioners may be more successful in providing support that prevents issues escalating. Normalising conversations about

the quality of relationships within communities and organisations and creating a culture where it's everyone's business to reduce parental conflict stands to de-stigmatise this issue for parents. Being able to access this kind of support and guidance from people that parents trust is vital to making this change.

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> Some people don't like speaking about things. Say, if they're arguing [with their partner], some people think what goes on behind closed doors stays there. I think it's important for me to speak out. Like I say you can just come in for a cuppa and a chat. If you haven't got anyone else to talk to, I'm just here. No matter how little you think it is. If you think it's affecting your child, please come in.
>
> - Parent Support Advisor
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Whilst training of this kind can support practitioners to understand that opening the can of worms is not only something they don't need to fear, but that it is also often necessary to enable change, putting this into practice requires more than training. Practitioners must feel safe and supported within their organisations to open the 'can of worms'. If practitioners don't feel they will be supported, in the event that the consequences of a conversation with a parent are outside of their comfort zone, they are likely not to ask.

ENABLING PRACTITIONERS TO HAVE A 'BE CURIOUS' MIND-SET

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At the start of this journey learners were invited to share their perceptions of their job role and purpose. They reflected that most of their work was led by the immediate needs presented to them by children and families. Experiences of this were quite polarised. For some this was a positive thing, it highlighted that families were approaching them for help and that as a professional they were listening to them and responding appropriately. For others this approach had its challenges, with words like "chaos" and imagery such as "running around like a headless chicken" being used. All practitioners shared their experiences of the increasing complexity and level of need they were being expected to deal with as part of their daily role, most of which would likely have been addressed by statutory services a few years ago. It's clear that the expectations of early intervention services are increasing, however the approaches described by some practitioners can lead to practice which is reactive and not preventative. During our final interview all the learners spoke about their increased ability to identify and understand root causes of presenting issues when they were working with children and their families. This means that, after training, workers report they have greater ability to slow down their thinking and 'unpick' and 'unpack' what is going on behind what they see on the surface. School based staff report greater intention to explore the issues occurring outside of school, rather than remaining school focused, in order to resolve issues impacting on children. This reflects an ability to be curious in work with families, to ask questions in order to better understand what life is like for them. This curiosity can uncover what might be going on for a family beyond the need first presented.

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> It's just slowing the process down because previously I was very reactive. She [parent] would ring me and I'd go straight out (...) It's about breaking that cycle, slowing down and thinking instead of being reactive. To say to them, "What could change? Slow down, what is the matter of urgency?" Some of the parents will just go "this, this & this" and I would normally react but it's like "OK, so what are you going to do? What can you do and what do you need me for?" Because you do just see a pattern of parents coming back in [to services].
>
> - Family Support Worker

Practitioners reported that learning how to use visual tools that facilitated curiosity, such as eco-maps and genograms (or family trees), helped open up these conversations with families, particularly when exploring the generational cycles of attitudes and behaviours. This skill has been reflected to be especially useful in work with parental conflict as it helps understand the norms parents have about what a healthy relationship is. For some parents, conflictual relationships and poor communication are normalised by what they witnessed in their own childhoods and therefore professionals having the ability to unpick this is vital to empower parents to break that cycle and model healthy relationships for their own children. Helping families to develop insights themselves through exploration of their own experiences and circumstances can enable them to have light bulb moments of their own.

INCREASING UNDERSTANDING OF PARENTAL CONFLICT AND ITS IMPACT ON CHILDREN

Enabling learners to be curious was essential to enabling them to ask questions about parental conflict. Prior to training learners reported that they didn't feel skilled or confident enough to ask parents questions about the quality of their relationship, or to know what they should do if they identified conflict. Many of the workers originally held the belief that parental conflict was a specialist area of intervention and because they weren't qualified Therapists or Mediators they were not skilled enough to respond. Despite this perception, prior to the qualification every learner expressed that they would like to feel more skilled and confident to support parental relationships. At the time, not all of the practitioners felt that they knew much about the impact of parental conflict on children and some noted a basic understanding of the impact of parental conflict on children, based on what they had experienced or witnessed themselves, or what they thought was 'common sense'.

This is where the two parts of our learning offer overlap in terms of content and objective. Nine of the twelve learners completing the Level 4 qualification also attended the How to Argue Better training and they reported that this was a key component of increasing their skills and confidence, in addition to the theoretical underpinning and wider skill set they gained from completing the in-depth qualification. All learners reported greater knowledge and understanding of parental conflict as a result of training and the majority discussed specific examples of how they were currently putting this learning into practice with parents.

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The very first conference was a wow moment in the sense that I didn't have an awareness of that [the impact of parental conflict]. The research that was behind it, you couldn't argue with it and it really made sense. I think I'm more aware now when I speak to children to try and delve in that. To see what their experience of home is and get an idea of whether or not it is an issue. (...) I wouldn't have done that before the course or the conference.”

- Parent Support Advisor

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Almost all learners reported a change in their practice around how they thought about or approached the issue of parental conflict. It is clear that the changes practitioners report in their practice around parental conflict (which will be explored in the section Enabling Parents to have Light Bulb Moments) is as a result of the initial light bulb moment of understanding the impact of parental conflict on children.

Enabling Parents to have Light Bulb Moments

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Many participants were beginning to think about their interactions with parents and what they could do to helpfully respond when they noticed signs of parental conflict. Beginning to recognise the stigma parents may feel in relation to talking about parental conflict made a number of the learners think more about how they could break down barriers and make themselves more approachable. Developing an attitude of being able to normalise these conversations resulted in practitioners taking on a "you can talk to me" approach with parents to reduce their reluctance to engage with support. Some practitioners felt comfortable sharing their own personal experiences of separation and conflict. This is a technique often referred to as 'use of self' in mentalization based interventions and can help build an alliance with the parent.

Parent Support Advisor: Actually talking about it and say things like, "I'm divorced. I know what it's like. It's an awful place to be. There is help there. I can help you. I can signpost you in the right direction." Having that initial conversation will put a parent at ease, and if the parents at ease, it has an impact on the child.

Interviewer: Would you have used your own personal experience before when talking to a parent?

PSA: I have done before once but now, I do it all the time.

Interviewer: And how do they react to that? How do you think that makes them feel?

PSA: Like I'm human, and that it's not just them. Because I think, when you're going through something like that – you tend to see all your friends around you in love, happily married, supposedly. And you think you're the only one going through it. It's nice to hear from somebody else who went through it, came out the other end, and everything's all right. You're still alive. You're still healthy, and you will get there. And, the school is here to help throughout that journey.

This, of course, is an individual choice that not every practitioner would feel comfortable with. However, the small number who used this approach fed back that it served a purpose of reassuring parents and breaking down the barrier between professional and parent. Whilst use of personal experience can be effective in building an alliance, as a strategy it can have its challenges and it's important that helpful guidance or intervention follows. Roberts (2005) notes the potential danger of a professional's self-disclosure overtaking and drawing focus away from the story of the client. However, it is argued by Cheon & Murphy (2007) that self-disclosure can be an appropriate and successful strategy where practitioners are able to exhibit self-awareness and reflect on why they are disclosing their own experiences and what impact this has on the other person.

As well as enabling a shift in mind set around parental conflict intervention, the training enabled the majority of practitioners to recognise parental conflict, even when signs were subtle, and have conversations with parents about it. As all but one learner occupied a non-statutory role at the point of completing the course, their identification and subsequent response to parental conflict, if successful in preventing further escalation of the issue, could remove the need for involvement of specialist or statutory services. Those who also attended the How to Argue Better training felt they had a range of simple strategies they could suggest to parents to help them de-escalate arguments. They noted that being able to give parents real life examples of what they could do to stop arguments was important. One practitioner gave an example of feeling confident enough to bring two separated parents together in one room. This is something she would have previously "leaned away from" but is now confident to do, once she has considered the appropriateness of doing this on a case by case basis. This was successful in enabling the parents to come to a shared understanding of how they needed to parent moving forward, in order to create the best situation for their child. This outcome demonstrates what early intervention workers can be enabled to do to reduce parental conflict. Doing this requires skill and confidence from the practitioner and, as explored in our Considerations & Recommendations for the Wider System section, the support of their organisation. In some cases practitioners may feel that recommending input from a specialist service may be helpful. For example when there are legal issues, such as disagreements over child contact. Increased ability to understand what they can offer, and what the additional value of a specialist service is, means practitioners can support parents first and potentially maximise outcomes from services such as Mediation, as a result of having laid a positive foundation for intervention. Practitioners report that as a result of their ability to ask more questions about the parental relationship they feel more confident and able to support parents to access specialist services. Their involvement with the training offer increased the awareness of the majority of practitioners of what's available in Hartlepool to support the reduction of parental conflict.

SOMETIMES...THE CONVERSATION IS THE INTERVENTION!

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At the beginning of our learning journey the fear about opening the 'can of worms', that many of the learners felt, was a result of their concern that they personally wouldn't know what to offer in terms of support or intervention. Practitioners were beginning to use a range of tools and strategies to help parents when conflict is an issue; however, in some circumstances they were not always needed. The stories shared by several practitioner's highlight that the conversations they are now able to have with families is an intervention itself. Many of these examples of work didn't require further 'intervention' by the practitioner or other agencies beyond a conversation about the parental relationship, which was successful in making parents think differently about their relationship and its impact on their child. Questions that enable awareness and can lead to change have been referred to as reflexive questions (Tomm, 1987). Asking reflexive questions is an important form of intervention in its own right and takes skill on behalf of the practitioner. As part of a helpful conversation, using reflexive questions practitioner's increased understanding about the impact of parental conflict on children was reported to increase confidence and ability to have these conversations with parents. This was an important change in how they responded to parental conflict.

> Giving the understanding to parents of the impact of the conflict on their children, and having those difficult conversations. I can provide the background that goes with it. Not just sitting there going, "this is wrong, but I can't tell you why". All of them say to me, "well, they didn't really hear it they were up in their bedrooms anyway" and we have nothing to go back with from that. But being able to back that up. It's been a big help to do the course because I've got that knowledge. Therefore, I can give them the understanding.
>
> - Parent Support Advisor

Learners recognised that some parents aren't aware of the impact of their relationship on their children. Parents not knowing that children were aware of conflict in their relationship was a key observation from practitioners, particularly those working with younger children. Practitioners confidence in feeding back that this was something affecting the children and being able to back this up with their newly gained skills and knowledge has begun to raise parent's awareness, which in turn has resulted in parent's determination to act differently.

> "
>
> A lot of parents don't realize what impact their argument is having on their own children, so it's making them see things differently. (...) They often find that's quite eye-opening. Then they realize that "actually, I need to make a change to help them
>
> - Parent Support Advisor
>
> "

It was reported that for some parents receiving this information was quite shocking and emotional, but it was ultimately well received and encouraged behaviour change. Practitioners who attended the How to Argue Better training praised the practical tools that could be used to communicate the impact of parental conflict to parents. The use of visual tools and metaphors were noted to be highly effective in helping parents to think clearly about their relationship, understand their conflict style and the impact this has on their children. This shows that for some parents a conversation about parental conflict doesn't need to go any further in terms of what a practitioner needs to 'do', rather it can be the catalyst of a change in parents that practitioners can support through checking in on progress and showing ongoing care.

> " I suppose the ultimate aim is to have as healthy a relationship as possible so that history doesn't go on to repeat itself, which is what one particular dad was saying to me. He doesn't want history to repeat itself with his children.
>
> - Local Authority Practitioner

Some parents already recognise the impact of parental conflict on their children, particularly those who themselves have grown up experiencing conflict or separation between their own parents. Discussing this with parents and helping them to firm up the actions they need to take to break this cycle can be a powerful instigator of change. Parents are then able to choose to make changes themselves or they may feel they need some help to do this. Either way, it's important not to downplay the power of these conversations in creating light bulb moments.

PARENTAL CONFLICT? WE CAN HELP WITH THAT!

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A number of the practitioners, particularly those working outside of the local authority, were also beginning to recognise they could do more to make reducing parental conflict part of "what we do" within their organisations. Consideration was being given to what could be done to show all parents coming into contact with the organisation that it's OK to approach them for support around their relationship. Many sustainable changes had already been put into practice at the time of the courses completion, with a small number of practitioners having the confidence to try to instigate changes in their organisations to reduce parental conflict.

Examples of changes made as a result of the course included;

- Explicitly talking about parental conflict as being an issue schools can help with, to open a dialogue with parents and raise awareness that staff are able to support them. One school had begun to specifically outline that support for parental relationships is available (as well as for other areas of concern parents may have) in an initial assembly for parents when their children start primary school.

- Schools asking questions about parental relationship status and quality in schools as part of the pupil enrolment process questionnaires.

- Making information about support available to parents when their children start school in in the form of leaflets in their 'starter packs'.

- Starting a 'family support drop in' session.

- Delivering parenting groups from the school facility to reduce barriers and this being a universal offer to reduce stigmatisation of parents who access.

- Learners acting as change agents and cascading what they have learned throughout their organisations to maximise the opportunities to recognise the signs and impact of parental conflict.

- Staff delivering training to other staff in their organisations about parental conflict.

- Signposting to specialist relationship support if necessary.

Sharing these practical examples of change can help other practitioners think about the steps they could take in their own organisations to contribute to reducing parental conflict. Parents seeing these changes will get the message "It's OK to talk to us" and are likely to get advice and guidance sooner through lower level conversations and avoid problems becoming worse and impacting negatively on their children.

What Prevents Light Bulb Moments? Barriers and Challenges to Changing Practice

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If the research evidence of the impact of parental conflict on outcomes for children is so compelling, then what reasons might there be to explain why people still don't approach it? Throughout our journey of changing the way we do things in Hartlepool to address destructive parental conflict we have gained a massive amount of insight into the impact of inter-personal influences on this work. To put it simply, it's hard! In this section we have outlined four of the challenges we have observed that pose significant barriers to parental conflict intervention. These challenges focus on barriers experienced by individual practitioners, teams and organisations.
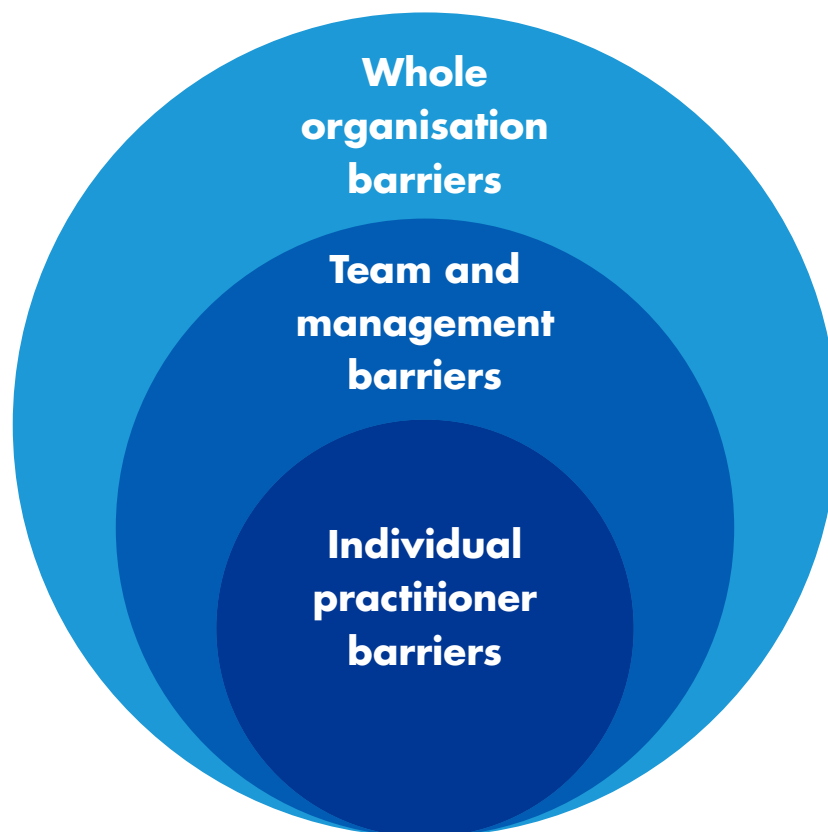

Diagram 1: Layers of the reported barriers to approaching parental conflict

THE EMOTIONAL EXPERIENCE OF PARENTAL CONFLICT INTERVENTION

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Workers shared their fears about working with parental conflict. Uncertainty around how questions about relationships will be received and whether they will be able to cope with what parents respond leaves practitioners feeling this area of work is scary. Practitioners are people with lived experiences too and many of them have been personally affected by separation and conflict. This area is extremely sensitive for some people and can result in them reflecting on experiences in their own relationships and childhoods. For some professionals being able to tap into their own experience is something they believe to be a positive thing that can help put parents at ease. Being able to tell parents "I've been there, I know what it's like" can help to develop the strong, trusting relationship between professional and parent that enables parents to feel they can open up without fear of judgement. As outlined in the section **What is a Helpful Response** this is, of course, a personal choice for professionals to make and comes with its own challenges. Whilst some may be comfortable with this type of personal disclosure, some may feel this is not appropriate. Those who choose to self-disclose will need effective supervision to manage this. Whether practitioners choose to share their personal experiences or not they should need support from their organisation to ensure that this doesn't negatively affect their wellbeing. Practitioners may still be concerned about where their involvement "ends" and where specialist services should "takeover" and this fear of overstepping a boundary may prevent them from approaching the issue with parents. How far workers are comfortable to go in responding to parental conflict is subjective, dependant on their own feelings and the support available to them. It is possible that practitioners could refer to team, management and organisation level barriers when talking about why they don't engage in the parental conflict agenda when the actual reason may be their emotional barriers which we have outlined.

> It's about knowing what to do, where your job starts but where it gets to a point where it needs to be something more specialised. So I think it's just important people being supported to recognise that line really (...) It's a difficult one because it's about the threshold isn't it? Therefore, the thresholds are really different there is no definition.
>
> - Local Authority Practitioner

THE PERCEPTION THAT MULTI-AGENCY NETWORKING CAN'T BE A PRIORITY

Practitioners taking part in our evaluation spoke positively about the opportunity to mix with professionals from other agencies and clearly outlined the benefits of this. This included building relationships and empathy and sharing skills and knowledge which resulted in empowerment of practitioners. Despite the benefits of strong multi-agency relationships to practitioner's professional development there is a lack of opportunities for multi-agency networking. Practitioners share that they don't have the opportunity to speak to other professionals due to time pressures of their role. Networking is seen as either a luxury, something that they could only do if they didn't have as much to do, or as not being a priority, something that they can't justify when they have so much they need to respond to. The Healthy Relationships Partnership identified the benefits of relationship building between professionals and as a result set up an Agency Network Meeting, where anyone providing support for families could come along to meet, and have conversations with, others. The network meeting was included in a recent NLGN (2019) report into revolutionising children's services.

A key observation we have made is that this opportunity was, in the main, accessed by workers from Voluntary and Community sector agencies, who reported a number of success stories as a result of building relationships with other organisations. Consistent with feedback from the learners, Family Support Workers and school based practitioners were not regular attenders of this networking opportunity. Voluntary and Community sector workers may occupy roles where activities are more self-directed, and their roles more developmental in nature, as opposed to practitioners in other sectors who may feel they need permission to attend networking opportunities. The Voluntary and Community sector may also have more of a partnership culture as a result of needing to work together to grow and continue to deliver services. The barriers to accessing multi-agency networking opportunities may need to be explored further if they pose a barrier to effective multi-agency networking in the future.

> **Interviewer:** Is that an opportunity you get to actually speak to people from different professions, different agencies?
>
> **Parent Support Advisor:** No, because you're so busy. We're so busy doing our jobs all the time. Yes, we're doing them the best we all can, but we don't always realize the impact of the way we do things on other agencies.

DIFFICULTY EMBEDDING TRAINING AND LEARNING AROUND PARENTAL CONFLICT INTO PRACTICE

Our learning shows that, for the majority of practitioners, access to training was successful in encouraging them to think and act differently in response to parental conflict. However, changing practice goes further than training alone. Learners reflected that it was important to keep learning and refreshing skills to embed what they had learned into how they work every day. One learner described training as a "starting block" that needs to be built on through continuous learning, practice and effective supervision. A small number of learners felt they needed to continue with learning and support around parental conflict to develop their confidence. Our learning from this research suggests that if investment in training is to be worthwhile a number of system conditions need to be in place. Lack of opportunity for reflection poses difficulty to practitioners being able to continue to use the skills they developed throughout this training. There is a challenge of organisations not creating time and space to think about how practitioner's attendance on training fits into a wider approach of workforce development that can benefit other staff members and the organisation as a whole. The Level 4 was based upon the premise that managers needed to be engaged and that engagement would underpin practitioners being able to translate their learning into practice. Engaging managers in the evaluation was successful to some degree. Some managers fed back how the learning would benefit their wider organisation and what their role would be in enabling this to happen. Others opted not to take part. This poses a challenge for developing an understanding of what managers need to do to make investment in training worthwhile.

> "
> I think training is certainly a very good starting block but I think so you don't lose it you need to add things on to it (...) you have got to keep going with it haven't you, so it's not just training and it's forgotten. Maybe for supervisors or managers to look at what the content of the course is and look at what they can build on. Or to have them conversations in supervision, "Have you thought about it from this point of view?
>
> - Local Authority Practitioner

EXISTING COMMISSIONING STRUCTURES AND ORGANISATIONAL PERMISSION

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Commissioned services may be reluctant to incorporate reducing parental conflict into their practice if it is perceived as not being the focus of the work they have been funded to do. Rigid commissioning focused on delivery of specific outcomes, specifically in services for children, may fail to consider the wider family picture because it is not part of the deliverables outlined by funders. This can result in staff feeling they aren't 'allowed' to embrace reducing parental conflict in the same way they would if they were able to intervene in a way that they felt enable sustainable change for the child. Many practitioners may also seek permission from those holding management or authority positions in their organisation to perform their roles in certain ways and may feel it's not part of their job if someone with authority doesn't give 'permission'.

> **"**
>
> It's a bit difficult I think, having that open door approach...talking about and working with separation of families and things like that. Having that background knowledge is probably, at the moment, as far as I needed to take that, depending on how the service moves forward. Working with separated families might not be something that I deal with on the parent side. It might just be the children,
>
> - Family Support Worker
>
> **"**

Considerations & Recommendations for the Wider System

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The process of answering our research questions also led to other considerations of the wider system. The majority of recommendations focus on what managers and organisations can do, rather than practitioners themselves. These questions may prompt thinking for those in leadership and management roles regarding how this learning could be applied to their own settings and contexts. We have provided the following prompts to enable thinking at a local level:

System	How is 'Early Help' defined?	• How can the early help system be mapped out in a way which identifies all the organisations providing early help and intervention to families? For example, schools, voluntary organisations, community groups, the local authority.
		• What do these provider organisations perceive as the shared identity of 'Early Help'?
		• What messages have leaders articulated to staff about work with parents more broadly, and reducing parental conflict more specifically, as being part of the work of the organisation?
		• How does this system of Early Help interact with and support each other to provide the best support for families?
		• How does the system share resources so that all those providing Early Help can benefit from them? (For example, opportunities for workforce development)

Whole Organisation	**How can services use learning to adapt what they deliver?**	• How is appreciative enquiry used to explore when things went well and learn from this, as opposed to only learning from 'mistakes'? • How much flexibility and ability do services have to adapt their delivery in light of developing research evidence? • How much flexibility and ability do services have to adapt their delivery in light of their own learning about what is the most impactful support for families?
	How does training fit within an overall workforce development approach and learning culture?	• How is training used as part of a wider strategy to develop skills and competence within the workforce that contributes to positive, impactful support for children and their families? • How is training utilised as a starting block for practitioner learning, upon which further learning and development is built? • What are the means through which practitioners can cascade their learning to colleagues following training to benefit the whole organisation? For example, through team meetings or "lunch and learn" opportunities. • How does supervision reflect the skills and knowledge practitioners gain from training by asking questions and prompting use of new skills in interactions with families? Is it continuous? • How is learning recognised, encouraged and praised by the organisation?

Team and Management	**How can multi-agency networking become a priority?**	• What opportunities are available for multi-agency networking locally?
		• How do managers articulate explicit permission for practitioners to attend multi-agency networking opportunities?
		• How are the benefits of multi-agency working identified and articulated to the workforce?
		• How is multi-agency networking used as something which serves a purpose to help practitioners do their jobs, improve their practice and ultimately improve support for families?
		• How is multi-agency networking used as an opportunity to share skills and knowledge, and therefore upskill individual practitioners?
	How are practitioners supported with the emotional aspects of their work?	• How does the supervision practitioners receive support them with their 'use of self' in work with families, where they have personal experience of the issues being explored?
		• How does the supervision practitioners receive look beyond a task and consider the emotional aspects of work with families?
		• What is the framework or structure that exists to encourage peer to peer support?
		• How do practitioners use specialist and statutory services as a resource to provide advice that supports them to contain families? (Hence removing pressure to refer onwards as a result of fear or other emotions.)

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Appendices

APPENDIX 1A: TRAINING INFORMATION- HOW TO ARGUE BETTER

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Process and Rationale for Selection of Training

Prior to investment in training from the DWP the Healthy Relationships Partnership were looking for training for the wider children's workforce to develop their understanding of the impact of inter-parental conflict. We also wanted to develop practitioners skills and knowledge to provide an appropriate intervention, fitting with their role. How to Argue Better (HTAB) was developed by OnePlusOne, a relationships charity with national credibility. The impact of HTAB had been established by their internal evaluations.

Course Content

How to Argue Better is a training programme for practitioners, designed to help them raise parents' awareness of the impact of conflict on their children and give them the skills to tackle their disagreements in a healthy way. The course gives practitioners visual tools and strategies to help them communicate the impact of parental conflict to parents.

Course Structure

Learners attend a one-day course. In Hartlepool the course was delivered by local trainers and learners received materials to take away from the training, including a How to Argue Better booklet and activity sheets, through funding by the Healthy Relationships Partnership.

More information: www.oneplusone.org.uk

APPENDIX 1B: TRAINING INFORMATION- LEVEL 4
WORKING WITH CHILDREN, INDIVIDUALS AND FAMILIES
—

Process and Rationale for Selection of Training

Organisations who met the criterea for training set out by the Healthy Relationships Partnership (HRP) were invited for interview by the HRP board. Interface Enterprises were selected following this process. The Level 4 qualification in Working with Children, Individuals and Families delivered by Interface Enterprises was deemed to be a quality training product based on a number of factors, including:

• OFQUAL regulated qualification delivered by an organisation with experience providing training to over 6,500 practitioners across over 65 Local Authorities

• Quality assured at a national level through Awards for Training and Higher Education (ATHE).

• The scope and content of the qualification was shaped by feedback from Local Authorities and other partners

Course Content

The qualification consisted of three units:

1. Engagement and Communication – Building Effective Relationships

2. Assessment, Tools and Planning

3. Supporting family members towards independence and self-reliance

The content aimed to provide the skills, knowledge and understanding required to effectively work with children, individuals and families. Following consultation with the training provider additional content was added throughout the course to apply these modules to the topic of parental conflict, with the aim of enabling learners to recognise and appropriately respond.

Course Structure

Learners attended a 6-day training programme in blocks of 2 days over a 7-week period. Each learner had an individual observation/discussion with an assessor and access to ongoing support. Learners managers were required to provide a witness testimony and learners were required to build a portfolio of practice. Learning outside of taught sessions consisted of self-directed reading, completion of assignments and projects and optional ELearning modules.

More information: www.interfaceenterprises.co.uk

APPENDIX 2: INTERVIEW TOPIC LISTS

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Pre-Training Interview Topic List

- What is your role? /How would you describe the work you do with families?

- What sort of support/intervention are you currently offering?

- How do people know about your service and how do they access it?

- What sort of things do they come to you for help with?/Who accesses your support/intervention?

- What sorts of needs do you encounter in your work, are there any themes/things that are highly prevalent? What level of need do you work with?/ How would you describe the level of need that the families have?

- How do you currently assess your clients? (What do you use to asses and what are you looking for and recording?)

- Do you work with other professionals to provide support to your clients? Who and how?

- Which family members do you involve in the assessment? What about…(How do you currently work with)…. parental relationships and parental conflict?

- Can you describe your approach to this? (How do you approach, engage and intervene?)

- What do you class as a 'successful outcome'? and how do you know when or if this has been achieved/ When working with families how do you know if you've had an impact?

- What motivated you to apply for this course?

- What skills are you hoping to gain and how do you think they will improve your practice and benefit your clients?

- What are you most/least looking forward to?

Post-Training Interview Topic List

Practice and Learning

1. Can you tell me what you remember as being the most significant topic/content from the training for you? Has it impacted on you or how you do things?

2. Has there been any change in how you assess and what you assess for? If so, whathas changed?

3. Has there been any change in how you work with other professionals and agencies inproviding support to clients? If so, what has changed?

Practice and Learning

4. Healthy Relationships Partnership aims to enable people to recognise, assess and intervene with the issue of parental couple relationships – what was your understanding of how the course aimed to help you do this?

5. Has there been any change in how you would approach, engage and intervene around parent's relationships and parental conflict? How do you/will you do this now?

6. Scaling Exercise

7. Do you have any plans for how you will engage with parents in the future to support stronger parental relationships? What will parents see now if they approach your organisation with an issue in their relationship and how is this different to before?

What Families Might See

8. Can you tell me what you remember as being the most significant topic/content from the training for you? Has it impacted on you or how you do things?

9. Has there been any change in how you assess and what you assess for? If so, what has changed?

10. Has there been any change in how you work with other professionals and agencies inproviding support to clients? If so, what has changed?

What Families Might See

11. Can you describe how your manager has involved themselves in your learning experience?

12. How important do you think WFD is to your organisation? Why do you think that and how do you know?

13. Based on your experience do you think this kind of WFD works? If not, what would need to be done? What would you recommend?

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