Appreciative Inquiry Case Studies 2009-2010

Case One

This inquiry related to a family consisting of mother, father and three children, who had been subject to a child protection plan under the category of neglect. They were subject to a plan for a total of 16 months. Identified problems included relationship breakdown of the parents, homelessness, financial problems, mental health issues and substance misuse.

Mother found it difficult at first to engage with professionals, the children’s school attendance was poor, and the children’s basic care including their hygiene and nutritional needs were not being met.

Mother was the main carer following her separation from the children’s father, she felt overwhelmed by the tasks facing her.

Father and mother both wanted what was best for their children and with the support of professionals, mother was able to express her view that the children’s needs would be met more effectively if they lived with their father.

Those working with the family had supported the adults to come to a solution that would benefit the children and allow mother to address her own complicated issues. Regular contact was arranged in a safe environment so that mother remained part of the children’s lives.

Areas of good practice identified

- Workers continued to engage mother even after the children were no longer with her
- Good social work values were evident in non judgemental attitudes, mother was not blamed and her difficulties were acknowledged
- A thorough assessment was carried out and identified the importance of engaging father in planning for his children
- Facilitation of inter agency working
- The parents were willing to work together for the good of their children
- Mother was supported when she came to conference
- A clear plan was in put in place at the conference
- Father was commended on his care of the children and his determination that the children maintain contact with their mother
- Father was supported to get a tenancy which was vital if he was to be able to care for his children
Case Two

This case related to a single mother who lived with her two children. Mother was reported to be using illegal drugs which were impacting on her mental health and her care of her children.

The children had witnessed domestic abuse and were said to be concerned about their mother who they believed to be “sad all the time”. Mother was described as having a loving relationship with her children, and she had feelings of guilt around the impact her lifestyle was having on her family as she often had little money left for food or electricity.

The children had health care needs and mother did not always take them to hospital appointments. A child protection conference decided that the children should be subject to a child protection plan under the category of neglect.

A referral was made to a specialist unit and mother agreed to start working with them to address not only the children’s needs but her own problems.

Mother wanted to change. She loved her children but felt she had no one she could rely on. She needed consistent support in order for her to improve life for the children and for herself.

Areas of good practice identified.

- The social worker arranged for the Benefit Agency officer to call at the family home to give mother advice. Mother recognised that professional’s intervention would help not only her children but the whole family. This was the beginning of a trusting relationship between the family and professionals.
- Mother was contacted on a daily basis either face to face or by telephone, this led her to feel she had people on whom she could depend.
- There was a list of actions for professionals to work to, as each was achieved they were ticked off the list.
- Mother was distressed at the initial conference and was supported and shown care, appropriate arrangements were made for ongoing support.
- Professionals were available for mother, were not judgemental and were prepared to come up with solutions to problems which mother could work with.
- Sharing of information both inter and cross agency and cross boundary was good.
Case Three

This inquiry looked at a family of four children who were subject to a child protection plan for a total of eleven months.

The parent’s relationship was characterised by reports of domestic violence and controlling behaviour. One of the parents had a physical disability and needed a lot of support from immediate family to meet basic needs. The other parent had mental health problems and was believed to be misusing drugs. There was lack of engagement with professionals and extended family.

The adults felt harassed by neighbours and the state of the house led to concerns from neighbours and professionals. The children were unkempt and said to scavenge for food they did attend school although the parents’ had previously been prosecuted for non school attendance.

At the time of the inquiry the family were still experiencing some difficulties but the following points were highlighted as examples of good practice.

- The family were helped to get their children to school and then supported to take on the responsibility themselves
- The needs of the children were assessed in school and their individual needs appreciated and parents encouraged to participate in planning strategies to support their children
- Good multi agency cooperation
- The chairing of the conference was very sensitive to the needs of the family and the chair person was instrumental in helping father see that professionals were there to help and not condemn
- The social worker was told by the family that “you believed in us”
- Social worker allowed mother to talk about her own issues
- Work done with parents had a positive impact on the way they met their children’s needs
- Workers including the social worker, housing officer and project worker helped the family see what needed to change and how that change could be achieved
Case Four

This case involved a young mother with two children. Mother was well known to Children’s Social Care as she had been accommodated as a child. She had witnessed domestic abuse as a child and she was now the victim of abuse from her own partner.

Professionals were concerned about the safety of her children as she continued to be in a relationship with her violent partner, and her children were made subject to a child protection plan.

Mother was able to understand why people were concerned but was frightened of how she would cope if she severed her ties with her partner. She also believed she would be socially isolated and at continued risk of violence as a single mother. Never the less she did cooperate, she separated from her violent partner and agencies believed the children should no longer be subject to a plan.

At the time of the inquiry things had deteriorated and mother was again in contact with her partner.

The workers who took part in the inquiry however were confident that the relationship that they had with mother and the strength of the professional team around her would prevent the situation getting to a point where the children were once again put at risk.

Examples of good practice were:

- Professionals were honest with mother and explained why they were worried about her and her children.
- Professionals recognised that mother needed to be encouraged to take up services and that this was a slow process.
- Mother was aware that the professionals worked as a team and shared information.
- Mother’s social isolation was recognised and she was supported by agencies who remained involved when the children were no longer subject to a safeguarding plan.
- The services offered met mother’s needs, and were flexible enough to change when circumstances demanded. The team recognised when the situation for mother was becoming difficult and assessed any risk to the children. They were then prepared to adjust but not abandon the work plan they had agreed with mother.
- The professional team supported one another and the lead professional.
- The team made it clear to mother that the welfare of the children must be paramount and she accepted this.
Key learning

What do we learn most often from appreciative inquiry? Often it is the small things that we are all aware of but which can be overlooked. For instance people generally respond best when there is mutual respect. This is true both between professionals and between professionals and clients. In the cases reported within this report it has been shown that initial meetings are often crucial in building up a good working relationship. One father was reported to have said that the attitude of the chair at the initial case conference was respectful of him as an individual and made him determined to cooperate with professionals. Similar comments were made in a number of cases reviewed. It seems that when clients are seen as part of the team and not just someone who is having actions imposed on them they are able to respond to professionals in a more positive way.

We have also seen the benefits gained when professionals respect each others roles. It is not always the most highly qualified person who becomes the lead professional, and this does not detract from their ability to take on this key role. A specific case highlighted this very well, and also demonstrated the support the lead professional should expect from others working with the family. In another enquiry one of the workers doubted that what they had done was effective, and they were supported by other members of the team to see that their contribution had been valuable.

Almost all the inquiries have demonstrated that when professionals have the courage to see through a plan despite set backs they are eventually rewarded with good outcomes. This sometimes means revisiting the original objectives and finding a different way through the difficulties. One review heard that by writing down the goals and ticking them off as they were achieved the family also became more convinced that things could change.

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