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Working in a Multi-Agency Way

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CHAPTER OBJECTIVES



This chapter discusses:

- Why it is now so important to work in a multi-agency way.
- The benefits and barriers to multi-agency working and how they can be overcome.
- How leaders and managers of settings can develop and maintain partnerships with other agencies.

Recent legislation in the UK dictates that everyone involved in working with children and families should work in partnership in order to provide effective support. Multi-agency working, where agencies work in partnership with parents and each other to enable all children to achieve their full potential, is identified as the way forward. This places a responsibility on all the professionals who may be working with the individual child and his or her family. A number of practitioners and agencies from across the statutory, private and voluntary sectors may be required to work together, with their parents, to fulfil the needs of the child and to ensure that the child progresses.

During the 1970s and 1980s there were a number of deaths of young children in the UK as a result of child abuse. During the 1980s the deaths of Kimberley Carlile, Jasmine Beckford and Tyra Henry were influential in the development of the Children Act 1989. More recently the death of Victoria Climbié prompted the government to set up a statutory

enquiry into the events surrounding her death in order to determine whether they needed to review the statutory framework for child protection. Lord Laming's report (the Victoria Climbié inquiry) was published in 2003. The report followed a Social Services report entitled *Safeguarding Children* (Department for Education and Skills, Department of Health and Home Office, 2003) and both reports identified a number of problems within the existing system for safeguarding children. They also identified more effective ways of safeguarding children; systems where safeguarding children were 'part of a spectrum of services provided to help and support children and families' *Safeguarding Children* (p.1). In 2003 the government published a Green Paper entitled *Every Child Matters*. The green paper explained how and why the government wanted to improve the way that people, organizations and local authority departments worked together in order to ensure that children and young people are safe, healthy, happy and successful. The Green Paper introduced five outcomes for children which local authorities and organizations have to consider when providing services. These outcomes – Stay Safe, Be Healthy, Enjoy and Achieve, Make Positive Contributions and Achieve Economic Well-Being – all have to be considered when providing any service or activities for children and young people. Further to these outcomes the Green Paper advocated ways of increasing communication between agencies and for them to work in partnership as 'multi-agencies'. Further legislation such as the 2004 Children Act and 2006 Childcare Act detail the duties and responsibilities of local authorities in promoting multi-agency working. All agencies are required to share information and assessment frameworks, and to jointly plan intervention strategies and funding streams. More recently the Department for Children, Schools and Families produced the Children's Plan (DCSF, 2007a) which set out new goals for 2020 and detailed what the government intends to do, building on the results of the past 10 years. In the Foreword the Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families writes:

The Plan and the new Department mean that more than ever before families will be at the centre of excellent, integrated services that put their needs first, regardless of traditional institutional and professional structures ... more effective links between schools, the NHS and other children's services so that together they can engage parents and tackle all the barriers to the learning, health and happiness of every child. (DCSF, 2007a: 3)

The Executive Summary continues with 'services need to be shaped by and responsive to children, young people and families, not designed around professional boundaries' (2007: 6).

The Children's Plan was produced as a result of continuous monitoring and evaluation which took place between 1997 and 2007, as well as consultation with children, young people and parents/carers. Practitioners in early years and childcare settings have built up working relationships with professionals within other sectors, that is, health, education and social services, with varying degrees of success. Prior to the actions of the newly elected Labour government in 1997, there were some childcare centres which were successfully working with other agencies, for example, the Penn Green Centre in Corby. These centres became the first 'Early Excellence Centres'. The 1999 Green Paper, *Building On Success*, launched the expansion

of these centres and by 2003 there were 107 early excellence centres in the country. These centres subsequently became the first Children's Centres, as part of the *Every Child Matters* Green Paper (Her Majesty's Treasury, 2003), and a target of 3,500 children's centres across the country by 2010 beginning in the most deprived areas, was launched. These centres were to combine a number of services in each area, including family support, health, childcare and education. This is not to say that some multi-agency working did not take place prior to this; previously, partnerships had been formed between voluntary and statutory organizations, usually for the benefit of individual children and families.



Case Study

During the late 1980s and throughout the 1990s a voluntary organization – the Magic Carpet Project – provided play activities for disabled children. The project used a playbus which was adapted to make it accessible for everyone, having a stair lift from the lower to upper deck and a slide for the fire escape. In later years the bus was taken out of service and the project focused on providing inclusive play activities for disabled children by enabling them to join existing mainstream services. The project provided individual support for the children when necessary as well as individual resources that could be used in the setting. Magic Carpet Project worked with children from birth to 12 years in the north-east



Photo 9 The Magic Carpet Bus

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of Birmingham and, as well as providing inclusive play opportunities for the children, it supported their families. Each family was visited prior to joining the project where the partnership between project and family began, supporting agencies were identified and contacted, and shared play/development plans were followed. Project staff attended case conferences and facilitated some families attending hospital or other appointments by transporting them in the project minibus (also accessible by means of a tail lift). The partnership working between the project, parents and professionals proved to be immensely successful for some of the children who, because of this support, were able to attend mainstream settings instead of a special pre-school or nursery. It also enabled older school-age children to attend local out-of-school activities to which they would otherwise have had no access. In addition, this also gave staff within settings increased knowledge, skills and confidence, which enabled them to welcome more children with diverse needs into their settings.

Private and voluntary childcare providers have sometimes experienced difficulties with partnership working but can often be in a prime position to support children and families as they are able to accommodate children from a very young age and may be the first people to identify when specific input is needed. One of the first settings that a family might attend is a local stay and play group; although these were often organized by parents themselves, they are now often offered as one of the services of a children's centre, either on-site or as an outreach service. In these cases they are usually managed by a childcare worker who is in an ideal position to begin to build up a relationship with the child and family. Children's centres are designed to be a central part of the community, providing a base where families with young children are able to come for advice and support as well as services and activities for the whole family. They provide pre-school care and education for children under 5, training courses for parents and carers, and fun activities for the whole family.

GROUP TASK



- Research the factors which influenced policy regarding working in a multi-agency way.
- Research your local area, identify any children's centres/services which are accessible to parents/carers and what services are offered.



Case Study

Hannah was diagnosed with a right porencephalic cyst causing left hemiplegia and West Syndrome when she was 6 months old. This resulted in Hannah having limited mobility on her left side and developmental delay. She was referred to the family centre at the local hospital where a multidisciplinary team was set up around her developmental needs. This included a teacher, nursery nurse, speech and language therapist, physiotherapist and clinical co-ordinator, who all played a vital role in supporting Hannah's development. The family felt that they were supported and actively involved in decision-making. Mum returned to work when Hannah was almost 1 year old and Hannah attended a private day nursery. Initially the nursery was unable to access direct input from the agencies involved with the family as they were based in a neighbouring borough. Instead they worked in partnership with Hannah's parents to plan for her developmental needs. The family later moved into the borough when partnership working with local services was established. Hannah is now 3 years old and participates in all the activities available at the nursery. A teacher visits home and the nursery and everyone works towards the agreed aims within her Individual Education Plan (IEP), her main target being to increase the use of her left hand. The partnership between the nursery and the local authority has supported Hannah and her parents, and will continue to do so until she leaves to attend school. The progress Hannah has made within the nursery setting has enabled her parents to apply for a place at mainstream school and they envisage no problems in achieving a place.



Case Study

Within the same local authority at another nursery, but part of the same company, the staff have difficulty in working with other statutory agencies. There are five nurseries in this local chain, the owner having a commitment to providing quality childcare for the children attending. The staff within the nurseries are all supported to attend training courses, both to gain qualifications and for professional development. There is joint in-house training for the staff and there is a shared vision and values. The staff at the second nursery have experienced difficulties when trying to plan for the needs of an individual child. Representatives from the local authority provide little support, and partnership working with the parent is also difficult. The staff are aware that they are unable to fulfil all the needs of the child but are receiving little support in their attempts to plan for the future.

Hannah's case study shows that partnership between agencies is beneficial to the child and family. In comparison the above case study identifies that this is not always an easy process.

Both nurseries follow the company policy on inclusion and have staff teams who are equally committed to providing a welcoming setting for all children. The nurseries are located within different areas and work alongside different local authority department personnel. These case studies highlight the need for identifying why multi-agency working can be difficult to put into practice and to find ways in which to overcome the barriers.

The Laming Report (2003) revealed that the lack of communication between agencies was a major flaw within the system, resulting in the government's commitment to multi-agency working. The legislation has been published and local authorities are aware of their responsibilities, but there are a number of barriers to overcome. Historically, different agencies have not worked in partnership; statutory services and the private and voluntary sectors have worked independently, with little or no communication between them. The exceptions to this have been with individual projects or agencies, such as the Magic Carpet Project, which were proactive in developing working relationships with other services involved with individual families. There was also a lack of communication between the statutory services with health, education and social service departments also failing to work in partnership with their colleagues. To put policy into practice is an ongoing process requiring agencies and individual practitioners to be proactive both within their specific work environment and the extended area.

Agencies, organizations or local authority departments all consist of individuals working within their own structures and with their own hierarchical systems and procedures and, even within organizations, communication can sometimes be limited and ineffective. This makes communication with other agencies and practitioners even more difficult. There are two aspects to examine:

- communication and partnership working within organizations – a responsibility of leaders and managers
- communication and partnership working with external organizations.

At this point it is also necessary to examine what we mean by 'partnership working' as there are different concepts. Frost (2005) explores different levels of partnership working and categorizes them in four stages: co-operation, collaboration, co-ordination and integration with agencies working through each process to ultimately become one organization which will enhance service delivery. Over recent years a variety of partnerships have been established, usually with a specific focus. The formation of children's centres brought together different agencies under the centre's umbrella. A variety of services from health and education including midwives, speech therapists, health visitors, teachers and careworkers work together with play workers, adult education and employment advisers to provide on-site services, advice, information and support for families. The children's centres have a co-ordinator who has the responsibility of developing multi-agency, partnership working.

Other multi-agency partnerships have sometimes been established around the specific needs of a child or family. Case conferences with a number of professionals involved with an individual child and family have existed for many years but more recently have been influenced by government initiatives such as the Common Assessment Framework (CAF). This has been introduced in England specifically to promote partnership working to support individual families facing health, housing, social needs etc. Together with the CAF a

process for information sharing was also established, ensuring that issues regarding data protection were addressed and overcome, and procedures put in place to assist channels of communication – both factors which had been identified as barriers to multi-agency working. In all these examples the teams, agencies or organizations consist of individuals who have to establish effective working relationships, often with no guidance or guidelines, and who are ‘directed to work in teams and expected to get on with it’ (Anning et al., 2006: 8). There is very little training available for practitioners or service providers to help with this aspect, yet it is vital for its success.

Practitioners come from diverse backgrounds with different professional beliefs and working practices. Practitioners doing similar jobs but from different agencies may have different pay scales and terms and conditions; different agencies may have very different funding streams. Different agencies also each have their own formats for documentation and may use different terminology. Tensions and barriers may occur because of misunderstandings caused by use of different terminology and/or practices. All these factors contribute towards difficulties faced when trying to establish multi-agency working. There is very little research available which evaluates the progress or success of multi-agency working, and a recent report (DCSF, 2007b: 3) confirms that ‘integrated multi-agency working was fairly new and still in development’ and that ‘it is too early yet to be able to measure impact in terms of outcomes for children and young people’. The report does, however, acknowledge the difficulties involved, and identifies factors which had been successful in helping to develop integrated working between practitioners:

- new induction processes to support practitioners in a multi-agency environment
- multi-agency training courses – to help staff understand each other’s services
- ensuring all staff were kept up to date with services available in the area
- careful planning to prepare staff for multi-agency working and the use of common processes
- the involvement of staff in ongoing development of services.

This report had a specific focus on the use of information technology (IT) tools in supporting multi-agency working but concluded that these were not of prime importance. The foremost thing being ‘where effective integrated working is based on strong personal relationships’, followed by the creation of ‘a fully integrated, sustainable service based on professional relationships’ (DCSF, 2007b: 3) which could then be supported by IT tools.

GROUP TASK



- What are the barriers to effective multi-agency working and how can these be overcome? (Consider, among other issues, relationships, geographical distance, time factors.)
- Identify multi-agency partnerships in your local area. Discuss their effectiveness and how this could be improved.

In identifying what needs to take place in order to improve multi-agency working, it can be seen that it is practitioners within the agencies involved who are the key factors in changing practice and forging partnerships. The DCSF (2007b) report confirms that in their research they found that integrated working was established and sustained by strong, personal relationships between staff who were committed to integrated working and had chosen to work in a multi-agency setting. This in itself is dependent on the management and leadership within each individual setting and, in turn, with their commitment to working in partnership with outside agencies. The effectiveness of any organization is dependent on the leadership and management, whether it is the leader of a small local playgroup, a nursery or a local authority department. All these agencies will probably have individual policies and procedures, based on national guidelines and adhering to law and legislation. How these are interpreted and put into practice is influenced by the owner, manager or group leader – the person with the power and control. There has been a considerable amount of research in recent years reporting on the importance of leadership and management, and how it can affect the success of an organization. It is also important to look at these two aspects separately – leadership and management, although normally referred to in one phrase, actually demonstrate very different qualities. Management can be seen as the practical aspect, organizing things or people; leadership is more of a quality demonstrated by certain individuals who can inspire and enthuse individuals or an entire workforce. The skills of management, because they are practical, can often be learnt; the qualities of leadership, however, come from within, often based on the vision and values of the individual. Successful leaders often have vision and values which are consistent across both their personal and professional lives, which enhance their commitment and enthusiasm and enable them to be creative and innovative (Shaw, 2006). These creative leaders may sometimes be less efficient at management, and sometimes what could be classified as ‘disorganized’ – it may be that to be creative, visionary or inspirational there needs to be a little chaos!

If we look at the factors involved in successful multi-agency working we can appreciate that it is a complex situation, not easily achieved. Effective integrated working needs to have:

- staff who are committed to multi-agency, partnership working
- common models of language, documentation and service delivery
- a high level of support for staff, including multi-agency training, induction programmes, regular opportunities for meeting and effective channels of communication.

All these can only happen if there is positive leadership and management, the DCSF report advises that ‘evidence of strong leadership and management [are] vital to successful integrated working’ (2007b: 2). Reflecting on the case studies earlier in the chapter we are able to reinforce these views. The Magic Carpet Project was innovative in its vision and practice in the 1980s, the only playbus in the country at that time that was accessible to disabled and non-disabled children and adults. It provided inclusive services for the children and promoted inclusion by example. The project was led by a committed management committee which in turn recruited a staff team who held the same vision and values. This team was proactive in initiating partnership working with other practitioners and services. In a similar way the private nursery provider has a commitment towards providing an inclusive

environment within all the company nurseries. The staff are influenced by both policy and practice, newer members of staff following the example of more senior members who demonstrate inclusive practice within the nurseries. The extent of the effectiveness then becomes dependent on the extended services, with one team in a specific area demonstrating a commitment towards working in partnership and others being more reticent. If they both work for the same local authority with the same policies, taken from the same legislation, the differing responses must be due to the human factor.

As practitioners, everyone has a responsibility to work in a multi-agency way, regardless of their position within an organization or agency. The reasons for multi-agency partnership working are now well documented and established, and supported by practitioners. Professionals all agree that they need to work together to safeguard children who are at risk and avoid further situations like that of Victoria Climbié. The legislation, guidance and resources have been put into place and continue to be revised and improved. The responsibility now lies with the agencies, organizations and local authorities to put it into practice. Each of these services needs to work independently and together to move forward.

DISCUSSION POINT

- Discuss the roles and responsibilities of practitioners within your setting and local area, relating to their influence on multi-agency working.
- Discuss different styles of leadership and management and how these influence the effectiveness of the workforce.



Further reading

Siraj-Blatchford, I., Clarke, K. and Needham, M. (2007) *The Team Around the Child: Multi-agency Working in the Early Years*. Stoke-on-Trent: Trentham Books.



Useful websites

www.everychildmatters.gov.uk

www.ecm.gov.uk/informationsharing

www.ecm.gov.uk/caf

www.ecm.gov.uk/safeguarding