

“This shared parenting we do is difficult to get your head around”

Experiences of parents and carers during their child’s first year at a residential therapeutic special school: a qualitative study.

Researching the needs of children in therapeutic residential and foster care

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The Mulberry Bush School is developing its work with families because establishing a good working relationship with parents and carers is vital in helping them with their child’s return home. This research investigates parental experiences of sharing the care of their child with a residential setting.



The researcher:
Dr. Caryn Onions



Showing the way in therapeutic care

Key points

- After one year children were easier to be with, less aggressive and had fewer violent outbursts, and were emotionally more in touch with their feelings.
- Parents and carers need to be supported to develop their ability to reflect on their parenting role and their relationship with their child.
- Sharing the parenting of challenging children can lead to tensions between home and school. Thinking about powerful dynamics within professional networks is emotionally demanding work and families and staff need encouragement, support and training to sustain this.
- Developing a comprehensive introduction to the school for parents and carers, alongside improving their reflective capacity would help home and school develop expectations which represent the child’s emotional potential.

Background

It is highly challenging looking after children who have experienced early neglect, abuse and trauma. Parenting a traumatised child is a complex task and standard parenting interventions do not work for these children. Family breakdown is commonplace and repeated disruptions can seriously impact young people's chances in later life.

This study took as its starting point these common factors;

- home relationships had reached breaking point
- the child was not receiving an education
- the input that families received had not helped them sufficiently to develop a better understanding of their child
- parenting was not able to support the child to live in the community.

Research aim

The aim was to investigate the impact on parents and carers of having a child placed at The Mulberry Bush, including the relationship between parents, carers and the school.

Phase one

Interviews conducted with all new parents and carers when their child started the school. The following themes were found:

'Off the scale' - parents and carers had been emotionally overwhelmed looking after their child. In addition it caused tension with other family members leaving parents and carers feeling torn. Birth parents struggled to come to terms with the effects of domestic violence and the impact on themselves and their parenting.

Participant: 'Yes, I'd had enough of it all, I'd had enough of not seeing my family, they had distanced themselves from us'

'Things don't make sense' - parents and carers described changing their parenting style. Foster carers took a monitoring and managing approach and birth parents found themselves avoiding confrontation. Their child's disturbed and bizarre behaviours were difficult to understand and foster carers often received incomplete and inadequate pen pictures. Their lack of understanding and incomplete information meant that their expectations of The Mulberry Bush did not match their child's level of trauma.

Participant: 'I have learnt maybe I was a little bit too soft with him to be fair'

'Not being taken seriously' - foster carers reported a lack of professional recognition which included other professionals not valuing or listening to their views of the child.

Participant: 'he asked 'why can't I live with Mum and Dad? I had to keep it simple as I didn't know why. He asked at least a couple of times over the weekend we just don't know what social services is thinking'

Phase two

Follow up interviews one year later uncovered the following:

'Some things are changing' - most participants said their child was less violent and aggressive and more able to talk things through. The birth parents described having benefited personally from the help.

Participant: 'it made me feel more of a person again, it's given me a life again rather than just having to spend my life for (child)'

'Co-parenting' - most participants experienced relief in sharing the parenting, but for some it caused tension which created difficult feelings towards the school. Participants reported difficulties managing their child's transitions between home and school, and were perplexed by their child's different presentation at home and school. Discipline was also frequently discussed and was either a point of unity or disagreement with the school.

Participant: 'it's too much for her having different boundaries, there are no consequences' whereas another participant said 'I like the boundaries, it's not wishy-washy'.

'Gaps in understanding' - most foster carers had not grasped how the school worked nor its model of practice. A number of participants continued not to understand aspects of their child's behaviour leaving them vulnerable to confusing and strong emotions.

Participant: 'is there a deeper darker side to (child)? They are the bits that we need to try and find out, but it does concern me and I usually raise it every time we have a CAMHS meeting'.

Implications

This study suggests that the parents and carers of abused, neglected and traumatised primary aged children are not helped sufficiently to understand and process the intense feelings which are evoked in their caring role. This means that rates of placement breakdown are likely to remain high. The researcher concluded that providing regular reflective groups, similar to those offered to Mulberry Bush staff could improve the ability of parents and carers to manage and understand their child.

The Mulberry Bush can build on its existing work with parents and carers, however as most families live some distance from the school, and a child's placement is time limited, this may mean new provisions for local authorities and fostering agencies.

About the project

This qualitative study used participant-led semi-structured interviews. The researcher conducted fifteen interviews with the parents and carers of seven children. Phase one interviews focussed on the reason for referral and the participants' experience of the child, whereas phase two interviews reviewed their first year. Fieldwork ran from February 2014 to March 2016.

For further information

Contact Dr. Caryn Onions, The Mulberry Bush Organisation, Standlake, Witney OX29 7RW.

Email conions@mulberrybush.org.uk

The full report is available on request.