

Supporting Families in Need: A Qualitative Case Study of the Support Care Intervention

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CASCADE Research Briefing

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Key messages for policy and practice

- Support Care is a flexible and adaptive service that can be used to support families with a variety of social care needs. It provides short breaks with a carer for children whose families need support.
- Families, carers and professionals valued the Support Care model. This was:
 - a) Genuine attempts to develop respectful, supportive relationships with families
 - b) The provision of meaningful, practical help.
- The service was seen as an additional safeguarding measure when children were thought to be at risk of abuse or neglect.
- The short-term nature of the service has some consequences:
 - a) Supportive relationships are built up in this service then come to an end. The severing of close bonds with support carers was emotionally challenging for some stakeholders, particularly for children.
 - b) Some family problems are long-standing and complex and are likely to need longer-term support.
- These findings are based on a qualitative case study research design. 82 interviews and 22 observations of were undertaken over the course of ten support care placements.



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What is Support Care?

Support Care is a supportive intervention for families in crisis and at risk of breakdown. It has been in operation since the 1990s, promoted by The Fostering Network and developed by local authority agencies and service providers across England and Wales. The service involves families being matched with a support carer, who it is envisaged will engage with parents and provide regular short breaks for children and young people. Although flexible, the service is time-limited with typical intervention periods lasting between six and twelve months.

The research study

This was a qualitative case study. Ten individual support care placements in three support care schemes operating in England and Wales were followed from start to finish. Social workers, support carers, parents, children and young people participated in the research. The main research methods were individual semi-structured interviews and participant observation.

The research aimed to understand how Support Care was delivered, how it was perceived and experienced, and how it attempted to alleviate family difficulties.

Positive service attributes

- Flexible service to meet individual needs
- Most parents found it helpful and children enjoyed the experience
- Parents and children reported gains in most cases, such as better relationships
- Helped social workers understand families' needs in more depth

The families that participated in the research were all experiencing social and economic disadvantage which included inadequate support networks, unstable and volatile relationships, as well as mental and physical health problems. Support care was found to be a flexible and responsive service which could be used to support families in a variety of ways. This included attempts to provide temporary relief from hardship together with opportunities to offer more specific help to parents and children. For children and family social workers, the provision of the service provided additional information and safeguards for children and young people deemed to be at risk of abuse.

Social worker Julie noted the service had provided "some really good information in terms of [parent's] ability to provide a stable safe environment ... and to engage appropriately with different professionals who are involved in the case".

Practice tensions

- Tension seen between providing enough help while avoiding dependency on a service that was scheduled to end
- Some problems were too complex to see improvements within the time-limits
- Some children and parents did not want the service to end

Key themes over the course of the research included the functions and features of time within the service, the relationships forged over the course of the intervention and attempts to support families towards 'good enough' levels of functioning. The research uncovered a tension inherent in attempts to give families the appropriate amount of time to provide meaningful support whilst seeking to avoid dependency on the service.



Figure 1: Ben (aged 8) drew a picture of the soft toy that he took to bed with him when sleeping at his support carer's home.



Relationships and facilitating change

The findings of the research suggested support care was valued by families, carers and social workers. The practical help offered to parents was positively acknowledged, as were attempts to forge supportive, respectful relationships with children and parents. Nicola [mother] stated: "She's like a friend really. In the beginning I was really nervous because I've never left my kids with anyone. But as soon as I met her, I just knew..." In some instances the positive relationships encouraged change as parents felt able to reflect on their parenting and seek advice from the carer. Reflecting on her involvement with a family, support carer Rachel stated: "*their way of communicating was different to ours... I used to spend time talking to Mum [and] she said 'I can see I need to calm down in the way that I speak to her. I get so angry that it just becomes a screaming match'*". However in other instances, efforts to maintain positive relationships with parents inhibited carers from communicating openly for fear of causing offence.

During the short breaks support carers were observed to encourage children's development and positive behaviours. Children and young people were also engaged in a range of activities. Some of the activities were designed to be 'realistic' and replicable within the family, whilst others were designed to 'enrich' the children's lives.

Endings and outcomes

As a result of the positive relationships established over the course of support care placements, the time-limited nature of the service was sometimes experienced as emotionally challenging. This was particularly evident for children. For example, Aaron (aged eight) stated: "*I miss them....I'd keep going if I could. I'd be going back and keep seeing them, if I were allowed.*" Family problems were often perceived to be on-going or evolving at service conclusion, as opposed to fully resolved. For some families, the provision of support care was helpful whilst it was available but it was not enough to achieve long-lasting change.



Figure 2: A sunflower grown by Ben over the course of his support care placement.

Further Details

This research project was undertaken as part of a PhD studentship at Cardiff University and was funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC). An electronic copy of the full thesis has been deposited in Cardiff University's institutional repository, OnlineResearch@cardiff (ORCA). This can be accessed via <http://orca.cf.ac.uk> Alternatively, please email Louise Roberts, RobertsL18@cf.ac.uk.

Publication: Roberts, L. 2011 'Ending Care Relationships: Carer Perspectives on managing 'Endings' Within a Part-time Fostering Service'. *Adoption & Fostering* 35, 4, 20-28.

More information about support care can be accessed via www.fostering.net/all-aboutfostering/foster-carers/support-care



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