

**Effective Relationships with
Vulnerable Parents to Improve
Outcomes for Children and Young
People:
Final Study Report**

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Action for Children –Effective Relationships with Vulnerable Parents to Improve
Outcomes for Children and Young People: Final Study Report

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Introduction

1. Previous research and evaluations show that developing an effective professional relationship makes a real difference in improving outcomes for service users. No matter how programmes and funding may change, it is the human relationships that are “core to the delivery of effective services”¹. Yet too often, they are overlooked. The Munro review² also highlighted the importance of professional relationships in improving outcomes for families and the skills and experience of social workers in being able to achieve this. Developments in other parts of the UK including a strategy for Social Work reform in Wales³ and the Children’s Hearings Act legislation in Scotland⁴ are underpinned by the importance of professional expertise and knowledge in improving outcomes for children and young people.
2. York Consulting was commissioned by Action for Children to undertake research to articulate how Action for Children professionals develop effective relationships with vulnerable parents and how this makes a difference for children and young people. The focus of the research was to develop a skills framework that would define the key aspects of effective professional relationships and the competencies required to achieve them.
3. The three aims of the research were to:
 - evidence and articulate the value of (i.e. the outcomes arising for children and families from) effective relationships as delivered by Action for Children practitioners;
 - define the key aspects of these effective professional relationships;
 - identify the competencies (personal and organisational) required to achieve these effective professional relationships.
4. The research involved a comprehensive literature review, comments from an expert advisory group and in-depth consultations in five Action for Children case study areas.

¹ Deep Value: A Literature Review, Kate Bell and Matthew Smerdon, Community Links, February 2011

² The Munro review of Child Protection: Final Report A Child-Centred System, Professor Eileen Munro, May 2011

³ Sustainable Social Services for Wales: A Framework for Action 2011. Welsh Assembly Government.

⁴ Children’s Hearings (Scotland) Act 2011. Scottish Parliament.

5. The following outputs were produced from the research:
 - **Skills Framework** – identifies the qualities, experience, skills and knowledge required by practitioners to develop effective professional relationships with vulnerable parents;
 - **Organisational Framework** – identifies organisational qualities that support the development of effective relationships between practitioners and vulnerable parents;
 - **Final Study Report** – draws on the literature review and case study evidence to outline the aspects and competencies required to deliver an effective relationship with vulnerable parents.
6. This is the final study report for the research.

Important features of the Skills Framework

7. A draft Skills Framework was initially developed based on the literature review and Advisory Group input. The case study work then explored stakeholder views on the features of the draft framework that were important in allowing them to develop good relationships with vulnerable parents. Stakeholders felt that certain qualities and skills are fundamental in being able to develop effective relationships with vulnerable parents, as outlined below.
8. **Maintaining a Child-Focused Approach:** Keeping a strong focus on the outcomes intended for children and young people is central to delivering a child-focused approach. This is particularly important for practitioners who have limited or no contact with children.
9. Being able to respond promptly and confidently to safeguarding concerns is an essential skill in maintaining a child-focused approach. Practitioners need to be confident in making sometimes difficult decisions to achieve the best outcomes for children and young people.
10. **Supporting and Challenging:** Achieving an effective balance of support and challenge that takes account of children, young people and family needs, service context and engagement is integral to the development of good relationships between practitioners and parents.

11. Assertiveness and persistence is central to the approach taken by Action for Children intensive family support practitioners. Persistently challenging parents' behaviour encourages them to take ownership of the issues that need to be addressed, whilst ensuring they are clear about the implications and consequences of their behaviours. Consideration of the timing of challenge and the parental response to that challenge helps avoid any negative impact on children and young people.
12. Action for Children practitioners working in early intervention services also challenge parents, but they do so with a greater focus on encouraging parents to recognise themselves areas where they require support. Practitioners from these services are keen to avoid alienating parents, and preventing a potentially negative impact on their relationship with parents.
13. **Being Open:** Being clear and direct with parents from the outset helps establish a good relationship. Providing clarity on the purpose of support, the intended outcomes and how safeguarding disclosures or concerns will be dealt with helps establish the professional boundaries of the practitioner–parent relationship.
14. **Building Trust and Mutual Respect:** Practitioners felt that demonstrating credibility and genuineness is a good way to build trust with parents. They reported that being down–to–earth and demonstrating warmth, are all ways in which to build trust with parents. Other approaches that are helpful are:
 - having the time to get to know parents – having a comprehensive assessment process;
 - being reliable and proactive, meeting agreements and taking actions, within set timescales;
 - keeping parents informed – maintaining ongoing communication;
 - recognising positive achievements.
15. **Empowering and Enabling Families:** Action for Children practitioners work with children, young people and families to help them move forward, address issues and work towards improving outcomes for their children. Using a solution–focused approach helps to build parents' independence by working with them to identify issues, set goals and targets and develop their own skills and responses to resolving the issues identified. This encourages parents' '*buy in*' and helps to build confidence and ownership.

16. **Action-focused Practice:** Taking a proactive approach to addressing children, young people and family needs and improving outcomes delivers a clear message to parents about the reliability of practitioners, which in turn supports the development of trusting relationships. Working with parents to prioritise and resolve issues and liaising with other services are all ways in which practitioners deliver action-focused practice. This helps maintain momentum to the support, ensuring that the focus on goals, targets and outcomes does not slip.
17. **Practitioners' Ability to Interact Positively with Children and Young People:** Being able to interact well with children and young people helps break down barriers, putting parents at ease about engaging in the support process.
18. **Facilitating Parents' Understanding:** It is important that practitioners are able to help parents understand terminology, jargon or actions needed in a way that is not patronising. Presenting information to parents at an appropriate level helps practitioners make sure that parents fully understand the information provided. Practitioners also have a role in presenting difficult information to parents in a sensitive and appropriate way.

What outcomes did the case study areas achieve for children and young people?

19. Data was collected across the five case-study areas to provide an understanding of the outcomes that are achieved through the delivery of Action for Children services. It is important to note that the purpose of this research was not to evidence the link between the creation of effective relationships with vulnerable parents and improved outcomes for children and young people. Rather, its purpose was to identify how effective relationships are achieved, given that a wide range of existing research establishes the importance of practitioner/client relationships in achieving positive outcomes. In this context, it was important to conduct the case study work in areas where there was clear evidence of positive outcomes.
 20. Outcomes achieved for children and young people through the support provided by Action for Children practitioners in the case study areas included:
 - improved attendance at school by children and young people;
 - children and young people are safe;
 - improved emotional well-being;
-

- child and young person development.
21. Outcomes achieved for families receiving support from Action for Children services included:
- more stable housing and living conditions;
 - improved relationships between parents and children;
 - improved family stability;
 - improved parental confidence and self-esteem.

What works well in Action for Children’s approach to working with parents?

22. **Consistency in Approach:** Parents spoke highly about the consistency of support provided by Action for Children services, valuing that practitioners always did what they said they would. Parents welcomed the fact that they worked with the same Action for Children practitioners and felt that they always knew where they stood with practitioners.
23. **Flexible and Non-prescriptive Delivery:** Providing flexible, needs-led delivery is an important driver in Action for Children’s ability to meet the needs of children, young people and families and improve outcomes for children and young people. This is achieved through:
- developing a package of support in partnership with families to meet their needs;
 - a strong focus on autonomous delivery and seeking new and creative solutions to meet needs and improve outcomes;
 - equity and equality in delivery;
 - having the time to develop relationships with parents which helps create a strong foundation for the practitioner–parent relationship;
 - delivering services in flexible locations to suit the needs and circumstances of children, young people and families;
 - setting flexible timescales for support, using ongoing review and reflection of the progress and needs of children, young people and families to adapt timescales as necessary.

24. **Facilitating Multi-agency Services:** Regular, ongoing contact between Action for Children and other agencies and professionals is central to the support provided to parents. A strong focus on developing links with other agencies helps increase family accessibility to other services, also increasing practitioners' awareness of other agencies that could be brought in to help meet the needs of children, young people and families.
25. Action for Children practitioners play a central role in effectively co-ordinating support with other agencies, facilitating multi-agency meetings, and adopting a lead professional or key worker role. Practitioners' effectively co-ordinate support for families by clarifying responsibilities across agencies and appropriately managing the level of service involvement with a family.
26. **Supporting Service Accountability:** Action for Children practitioners encourage other services to meet their responsibilities for children, young people and families. Practitioners challenge other services, where necessary, to ensure they meet agreed actions and responsibilities. This reflects the child and action-focused ethos of Action for Children services.

Facilitators in the development of effective relationships with parents

Organisational Facilitators

27. **Management Commitment and Ethos:** Creating a service culture where practitioners feel supported, trusted and empowered is helpful in establishing strong relationships with parents. This is achieved by:
 - having an '*open door*' approach to management, which supports practitioners to develop new ideas and encourages ongoing communication between practitioners and management;
 - providing practitioners with autonomy to manage their own caseloads and have the independence to work with children, young people and families to identify and seek solutions to needs.
28. **Practitioner Training and Development:** Providing formal and informal opportunities for practitioner training and development. Practitioners are engaged in a range of external and internal learning opportunities, which supports their professional development and the development of skills to assist in the relationship-building process. Other practitioner training and development opportunities include:

- local authority links which increase practitioners' access to a wide range of training opportunities;
- involving practitioners in local-authority or multi-agency forums or panels; increasing practitioners' awareness of local policies and priorities, which are then cascaded to other colleagues;
- providing new or less experienced practitioners with shadowing opportunities as a way of building skills in how to develop effective relationships with parents.

29. **Effective Supervision:** This is critical in supporting practitioners to improve outcomes for children, young people and families and to develop good relationships with parents. Practitioners felt that supervision provides the opportunity to discuss individual cases, raise issues and find solutions to those issues with their supervisor. Allocating sufficient time for meaningful supervision to take place was felt to be important; particularly for practitioners working with families with complex and multiple needs.

Delivery Level Facilitators

30. **Team Development and Support:** Action for Children practitioners demonstrated a strong ethos of respect for their colleagues, valuing their backgrounds, experience and particular strengths. They are also aware of how they could use the support provided by other practitioners to assist with their own cases. Practitioners commonly reported sharing ideas, issues and working together with colleagues to find solutions to address the needs of children, young people and families and improve outcomes.
31. **Creating a Welcoming Environment:** Practitioners felt that creating a welcoming environment, where parents feel at ease supports engagement and encourages the development of positive relationships. Practitioners also felt that it is important for them to create a positive atmosphere within the service to help parents feel comfortable. Parents reflected this view, stating that practitioners work hard to ensure that services are welcoming.

Family Level Facilitators

32. These include:
- parental willingness to improve or make changes;
 - strong assessment processes.

Challenges in the development of effective relationships with parents

33. **Meeting Organisational Requirements:** Achieving an appropriate balance between family contact and meeting organisational requirements is challenging. Practitioners are concerned about the potential impact on front-line delivery of requirements to complete multiple monitoring systems and have fears about output and target focused-funding. In particular, practitioners felt that being too target driven risks families being exited from support before they are ready.
34. **Effective Support for Practitioners:** Allowing practitioners' time for meaningful reflection within supervision is often challenging within the available resources. Practitioners and managers reported that they are often providing reactive, target-driven services and as such face challenges in providing practitioners with sufficient opportunities to reflect on their practice.
35. **Engagement of Other Services:** Practitioners occasionally face challenges in securing the commitment and maintaining the engagement of other agencies. Following up other agencies to ensure they meet their responsibilities to children, young people and families and are delivering on agreed actions is time consuming for practitioners. Encouraging other agencies to take action or fulfil their responsibilities at the pace that Action for Children practitioners would like is also frustrating on occasions.
36. **Family Context and Circumstances:** Practitioners recognised that because of the nature of the families they work with there are often external factors that influence their ability to develop an effective relationship with parents. These include:
 - **parents' preconceptions or negative experience of working with other services:** parents are often highly suspicious of engaging in support, due to previous negative experiences of working with other services, pre-conceptions of the support on offer, or a lack of confidence. Such families require a much greater level of contact and work to develop an effective relationship;
 - **the timing of interventions:** the timing of support for families is not always appropriate because of other issues within the family. This means that they are sometimes not in a position to, or do not wish to engage with the support on offer;

- **parenting ability:** parents who have not received appropriate parenting themselves often have limited knowledge about how to interact with, and parent their own children. Overcoming poor parenting is a challenging issue for practitioners to address.

1 INTRODUCTION

Purpose of the Research

- 1.1 Previous research and evaluations show that developing an effective professional relationship makes a real difference in improving outcomes for service users. No matter how programmes and funding may change it is the human relationships that are “core to the delivery of effective services”⁵. Yet too often they are overlooked. The Munro review⁶ also highlighted the importance of professional relationships in improving outcomes for families and the skills and experience of social workers in being able to achieve this. Developments in other parts of the UK including a strategy for Social Work reform in Wales⁷ and the Children’s Hearings Act legislation in Scotland⁸ are underpinned by the importance of professional expertise and knowledge in improving outcomes for children and young people.
- 1.2 York Consulting was commissioned by Action for Children to undertake research to articulate how Action for Children professionals develop effective relationships with parents and how this makes a difference for children and young people. The focus of the research was to develop a skills framework that would define the key aspects of effective professional relationships and the competencies required to achieve them.
- 1.3 The three aims of the research were to:
- evidence and articulate the value of (i.e. the outcomes arising for children and families from) effective relationships as delivered by Action for Children practitioners;
 - define the key aspects of these effective professional relationships;
 - identify the competencies (personal and organisational) required to achieve these effective professional relationships.

⁵ Deep Value: A Literature Review, Kate Bell and Matthew Smerdon, Community Links, February 2011

⁶ The Munro review of Child Protection: Final Report A Child-Centred System, Professor Eileen Munro, May 2011

⁷ Sustainable Social Services for Wales: A Framework for Action 2011. Welsh Assembly Government.

⁸ Children’s Hearings (Scotland) Act 2011. Scottish Parliament.

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Research Outputs

1.4 There are three outputs from the research.

Output	Purpose
Final Study Report	The Final Study Report draws on the literature review and case study evidence to outline the aspects and competencies required by practitioners to deliver an effective relationship with vulnerable parents. It also provides examples of how Action for Children services are delivering effective relationships with vulnerable parents.
Skills Framework	The Skills Framework identifies the qualities, experience, skills and knowledge that are essential for practitioners to develop effective professional relationships with vulnerable parents in order to improve outcomes for children and young people. This is across three broad stages of relationship development – building rapport with parents, identifying needs, and meeting needs.
Organisational Framework	The Organisational Framework identifies organisational qualities that support the development of effective relationships between practitioners and vulnerable parents. It also provides examples of how Action for Children services are delivering these organisational qualities.

Methodology

1.5 The research employed a multi-method approach, incorporating the following activities:

- a review of existing literature;
- consultation with an expert advisory group;
- case study research in five Action for Children sites.

Literature Review

- 1.6 A comprehensive literature review was undertaken. The purpose was to establish evidence of the:
- importance of effective relationships with parents in contributing to achieving outcomes for children and young people;
 - qualities, skills and knowledge required by practitioners to develop effective relationships with vulnerable parents;
 - organisational qualities required to support the development of effective relationships.
- 1.7 Evidence from the literature review was used to produce the draft Skills Framework.
- 1.8 Clearly defined search criteria (see **Annex A**) were used to collate a wide variety of documents, including published research and evaluation reports, policy documents, press articles, as well as ‘grey literature’ on websites.
- 1.9 This preliminary search identified 75 documents, which appeared to have some relevance to the aims of the literature review. A total of 32 documents were identified from the original 75 for more in-depth analysis in order to highlight the key features of effective relationships between practitioners and vulnerable parents.
- 1.10 It is important to note that all documents selected for in-depth review had either some reference to effective relationships or were viewed to be of use in the development of the draft Skills Framework. References are provided in **Annex B**.

Limitations

- 1.11 The specific focus on understanding the important features of effective relationships between practitioners and vulnerable parents presented some challenges. The international and UK literature in this area was found to be mainly focused on social work practice. It was therefore challenging to isolate literature that focused on the important features of practitioner–parent relationships in broader service settings, particularly any that related specifically to the voluntary and community sector.
-

1.12 Nevertheless, the literature review provided a useful starting point for identifying the qualities, skills and knowledge required by practitioners to develop effective relationships with practitioners.

Case Study Research

1.13 The purpose of the case study research was two-fold. Firstly, it provided the opportunity for Action for Children managers and practitioners to provide feedback on the draft Skills Framework. Secondly, it provided evidence of ways in which Action for Children practitioners are delivering effective relationships with vulnerable parents, across varying service contexts, and how these result in positive outcomes for children, young people and families.

1.14 Action for Children selected five sites as case studies for this research and each of the four nations (Northern Ireland, Wales, Scotland and England) were represented.

Case Study Areas – Service Context

1.15 A description of the service contexts for these case study areas is provided in **Table 1.1** below.

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Case Study	Type of Service	Purpose/Background to Service
A	Early Intervention	<p>The service aims to support children aged 8–13 years old; who are vulnerable to offending and anti-social behaviour. The service has operated since June 2008. Families are referred to the service via the police or through the local youth services.</p> <p>The service provides individual work, group work and family support. Individual work with children includes addressing issues such as behaviours (anger and behaviour management; poor social skills; engaging in risk-taking behaviour; poor school attendance and behavioural issues within school and home); relationships (separation and loss; difficulties establishing and maintaining friendships, difficulties communicating with adults) and well-being (low self-esteem and self-confidence; coping with change/transition).</p>
B	Intensive Family Support Service for families with multiple and complex needs (FIP)	<p>The Family Intervention Project was set up to reduce anti social behaviour and prevent homelessness. They targeted families involved in persistent anti-social behaviour and worked to improve outcomes for children in families facing multiple disadvantages.</p> <p>The service works with families who are parents with children/young people aged up to 18 and have a range of complex issues and needs. The service works with older parents, parents with drug and alcohol issues and mental health issues.</p> <p>The type of support provided to families (i.e. outreach, dispersed or a core unit) is dependent on the level of need. The approach taken by practitioners however is common across all types of support – persistent, tenacious and providing regular support.</p>
C	Children’s Centre	<p>The Children’s Centre is located in the grounds of a primary school and supports children under 5 years of age and their families, by offering advice and support through universal and targeted services. The aim is to ensure that services meet local needs and contribute in improving the outcomes and impact for children and their families.</p> <p>Services include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Early Intervention Family Support • Child and family health services • High quality early learning experiences

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Case Study	Type of Service	Purpose/Background to Service
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Parenting programmes • Access to specialist services for families like speech and language clinics, counselling services • Support in finding work or training opportunities, using links to local Jobcentre Plus • Creating an environment where parents are heard and involved in decisions <p>Services are also offered in other venues or within the home environment</p>
D	Early Intervention	<p>The Action for Children service is community-based offering services across tiers 1 to 3 level of need.</p> <p>The services provided are:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • universal offer of drop-in services – parent and toddler groups, baby clubs, after school clubs, family outings and activities; • parenting group and individual support – primarily accessed as a result of referrals from children’s services and health visitors (0 to 18 years); • parenting support (usually referred from health visitors) in the form of the Incredible Years Programme (Webster-Stratton), a 20 week parenting capacity programme (3 months – 3 years); • young carers service, including group sessions, trips, residential and individual support.
E	Intensive Family Support Service for families with multiple and complex needs	<p>The local housing and social work departments established the service to assist families who were homeless or at severe risk of homelessness due to their anti-social behaviour. The service provides:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Residential support – provision of a core block where three families can live; • Community based support via dispersed tenancies; • Parenting support to families who are at risk of engaging in anti-social behaviour. <p>The project uses a range of methods including one-to-one work with parents and/or children; anger management; developing home-skills; parenting groups using established programmes (Incredible Years); and tenancy workshops. Where appropriate, referrals are also made to specialist services, such as drug and alcohol or mental health services.</p>

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Methodology

1.16 Across the case study areas interviews and focus groups were undertaken with:

- six Action for Children managers;
- 21 delivery practitioners;
- 36 parents;
- six wider stakeholders (e.g. referral agencies, links services).

1.17 Case study areas also provided data they held on the outcomes achieved for children, young people and families from their involvement in Action for Children services. Report cards⁹, annual reports and external evaluation reports were collected across areas.

⁹ Action for Children Services are encouraged to deploy a results-based accountability methodology and each produces a report card highlighting clear and concise information about the difference that services make for children, young people and families. This allows local Action for Children services to evidence the value of their work and allows key achievements to be aggregated across services.

2 IMPORTANT FEATURES OF THE SKILLS FRAMEWORK

2.1 We initially developed a draft Skills Framework based on the literature review and Advisory Group input. It included:

Qualities	Skills	Knowledge
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Support and Challenge • Empathy and Positive Regard • Ability to Build Trust and Mutual Respect • Openness • Self-awareness and Self-reflection 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Empowering and Enabling Families • Communication Skills • Planning Skills • Contracting Skills • Decision-making Skills • Problem-solving • Offering a Flexible and Non-prescriptive Approach to Delivery • Engaging and Working With Other Services • Planning for the End of Support • Time Management and Organisational skills 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Technical and Professional Expertise • Awareness of Equality and Diversity Issues • Understanding Family Context • Knowledge of Support Available • Knowledge of Child Development

2.2 Our case study research then explored stakeholder views on the features of the Skills Framework that were most important in allowing them to develop good relationships with vulnerable parents. More detailed evidence was also captured on how practitioners were using these qualities and skills in practice and how they support an improvement in outcomes for children and young people.

2.3 Stakeholders felt that there were certain qualities and skills that are fundamental to the development of effective relationships with vulnerable parents. They identified the following as being of particular importance:

- maintaining a child-focused approach;
- supporting and challenging;

- being open;
- building trust and mutual respect;
- empowering and enabling families;
- action-focused practice;
- practitioner’s ability to interact positively with children and young people;
- facilitating parents’ understanding.

Maintaining a Child-Focused Approach

- 2.4 Keeping a clear focus on the intended outcomes for children and young people is central to delivering a child-focused approach.
- 2.5 Maintaining a child-focused approach is particularly important for practitioners that have more ongoing direct contact with parents. Practitioners in services providing support for parents, with limited or no contact with children felt there was a risk that this could lead to a greater focus on meeting the needs of the parent/s, rather than the children. They identified that it is imperative in such service contexts that practitioners remain focused on improving outcomes for children and young people. Practitioners recognised that when addressing parental needs, setting child focused targets and goals is an essential mechanism for maintaining the child-focus and improving their outcomes.
- 2.6 It is also important for practitioners to know when to act and intervene when working with families. This is particularly an issue for families where there are safeguarding concerns and a child is (or children are) potentially at significant risk. Practitioners need to be clear, knowing when they should act to best meet the needs of children and young people.

Example

This family were mistrustful of support agencies that had previously worked with them as they felt that their son was getting the blame for behaviour that they did not feel he was responsible for. The family were initially suspicious of Action for Children practitioners and were reluctant to engage in support.

After informal discussions between the family and the practitioner, they began to understand that the service was there to support them and to help them make positive changes for their children. Not only did the practitioner show an interest in the young person involved with the Action for Children service, they also provided support and guidance for his sibling.

The practitioner felt that providing support to the whole family helped develop a trusting relationship, which showed that there was a desire to improve outcomes for all family members. The mother in the family identified the practitioner's "*down to earth approach*" as being central to building a positive relationship. As a result of this, the family engaged in the support on offer and were receptive to the suggestions the practitioner provided to improve outcomes for the children.

- 2.7 Practitioners' ability to make difficult decisions to achieve the best outcomes for children and young people is integral to maintaining a child-focused approach. Practitioners recognised the importance of responding promptly and confidently to safeguarding concerns and having the skills and experience to manage risk. In particular, it is important for practitioners to develop a relationship with parents that is open and transparent and makes parents aware of the limits of confidentiality.
- 2.8 Responding and taking action in relation to safeguarding concerns is common for practitioners. Intensive family support practitioners reported that occasionally they provide evidence to statutory services to support the removal of children from the family home. Having the skills to deal with such situations is therefore vital.

Example

Parents informed Action for Children staff that their son had a medical condition, admitting that they teased him excessively about it. An Action for Children practitioner told the parents that teasing their son and making threats was unacceptable, and that she would have to discuss the issue with their son and her manager.

The practitioner discussed with the father how he could better deal with his son's health condition in a sensitive manner. This included helping him understand the impact of the language he used on his son, encouraging him to use more appropriate language. The practitioner also worked with the young person to increase his knowledge of the condition and help him understand why he needed to take his medication.

As a result of the practitioner working intensively with the family, the father and son now communicate in a much more effective way and their relationship has improved considerably. The young person now feels that his father deals with his condition very well, with no name-calling or threats. The young person is now managing his condition more effectively and feels he is able to talk openly with his father about it.

Supporting and Challenging

What does the literature tell us?

The evaluation of the Family Intervention Projects for the Department for Education (White *et al.*; 2008) identified the persistent key worker approach as integral to making a difference to families. Parents in this study viewed this persistent approach in a positive light; they recognised and felt reassured that key workers would “*not give up on them*”.

Forrester *et al.*'s (2008) research into the importance of communication skills in child protection identified that it was important that social workers were able to achieve a balance of empathy and challenge. The research suggested that it was important that social workers were clear with parents about concerns, but that these were not the sole focus and that social workers also facilitated a dialogue with parents. The research found that workers who raised concerns empathetically were able to challenge parents about concerning behaviour whilst retaining a positive relationship with them. The study identified skilled practice or true professional competence (in social work) as being able to raise concerns in an empathic way that allowed them to maintain their relationship with the parent and the child.

- 2.9 Achieving an effective balance of support and challenge is integral to the development of good relationships between practitioners and parents. The approach taken by Action for Children practitioners to support and challenge parents varies at a service and individual level. Practitioners felt it was important to adapt their approach, depending on the type and needs of families, service context and engagement in the service.
- 2.10 Action for Children services working with families with multiple and complex needs are more likely to use a greater level of challenge in their practice. Intensive family support services regularly support families who are at risk of homelessness, where there are issues of anti-social behaviour or their children are at risk of being taken in care. As such, the support provided by the services has a strong focus on challenge. Practitioners need to be open with parents about potential sanctions that may be used by other services and the consequences of not making positive changes.
- 2.11 Assertiveness and persistence is central to the approach taken by practitioners working in Action for Children intensive family support services. Practitioners felt they persistently and consistently challenge parents on their behaviour and issues, supporting them to make positive changes and to improve outcomes for their children. Practitioners and parents referred to this as a ‘*direct*’ and ‘*no nonsense*’ approach, with a focus on ensuring parents are clear about the consequences and implications of their behaviours.

“Sometimes you have to say to the parents I don’t believe that and I’m not going to take what you’ve said at face value. You have to corroborate or not their story.”
(Practitioner)

“I am stubborn I know, I got a new table, it was stupid but I put it where it wasn’t safe for the kids and she {the support worker} didn’t stop telling me that the kids could hurt themselves and I need that – I need to be challenged.” (Parent)

2.12 Practitioners working in intensive family support services indicated that parents often test boundaries and cover up poor behaviour to avoid negative consequences. Using a persistent approach, being in regular and intensive contact, and relaying consistent messages to parents all help practitioners demonstrate to parents that they cannot *'beat the system'*. An Action for Children intensive family support manager reported that their practitioners were *"hard to get rid of easily"*, reflecting the approach used when working with challenging families.

Example

The mother in this family has three children and issues with drug misuse. All children were placed in care due to the mother's exposing the children to risky situations.

The practitioner had to both support and challenge the mother to try to make her understand that her behaviour meant that currently the best thing for her children was that they were in care and she therefore needed to change her behaviour and accept support for this, before there could be any consideration of whether her children might be best served in the future by living with her again. The practitioner worked with the mother to try to get her to realise that her children should be the priority in her life.

Through the support received from the Action for Children service and the relationship developed between the practitioner and the mother there have been major changes in the parent's confidence and the practitioner felt that the parent was making the right changes in her behaviour.

2.13 **Practitioners felt that it was important to consider how parents might respond to significant challenge.** In intensive family support services it is essential for practitioners to consider how a family may react to being challenged on a specific issue; pre-empting where possible their reaction to that challenge. Practitioners also felt that it is important to be aware of the potential impact of parental challenge on children within the family. Practitioners regularly consider the timing of challenge to minimise any negative effects on children within families. They may choose to challenge parents when children are not present; for example, during school hours or after the children have gone to bed.

Example

A key worker was working with a mother who had her four children placed into care. The mother was found to be in a relationship with her ex-partner who was known to be violent and an alleged drug dealer. The key worker had severe concerns about the relationship because of the potential risk to the children if they were to be placed back with their mother. Due to the positive relationship between the practitioner and the mother, the practitioner was able to use her authority to challenge the mother on her relationship. In particular, she was open with her that she had a requirement to pass information on to social services.

“I said to her, you’re saying to me that you’re not having a relationship with him, but you should know that if you were with him it would get back to me. I need you to tell me the truth about your relationship.”

Example

In this family, there were issues with the mother in the family having relationships with partners who might place her children at risk. The Action for Children practitioner listened and took account of the mother’s needs, her age and her experiences of being parented, whilst maintaining a clear focus on the welfare of the children. The practitioner supported the mother to be honest with social services, and from this was able to support her to understand the potential safeguarding issues for her children.

The practitioner cited high profile examples from the media where a mother’s vulnerability had placed her child in risky situations. This encouraged the mother to reflect on her own actions and what she needed to do to ensure that her children remained safe.

2.14 Early intervention and preventative Action for Children services also use challenge in their approach to working with parents, but to a lesser degree. Practitioners are more conscious of the need to *“tread carefully”* when challenging parents, mindful of the voluntary nature of the service and an eagerness to make sure relationships with parents remain positive. Managers felt that it is important that practitioners are aware of parents being potentially intimidated when engaging with a service. As such, decisions around the use of challenge need to consider the potential impact on a parent’s engagement, and how it might affect the future engagement of other parents in the local community.

2.15 Practitioners working in early intervention services are more likely to use a softer, encouragement-focused approach to challenging parents. This is generally less directive than the approach taken by intensive family support services, though practitioners felt that they still challenge parents on issues or behaviour in order to make positive change.

Example

The father in this family was misusing alcohol and when intoxicated he would argue with his son. Initially, the father did not connect his drinking with the arguments he had with his son.

The Action for Children practitioner spent time questioning the father about his behaviour and drinking: *“so you argued? Had you had a drink? Oh that’s interesting, that happened last time”*. It took the father a few weeks to recognise the link between his misuse of alcohol and the arguments with his son. The practitioner used questioning skills to help the father acknowledge the problem, rather than just presenting him with the problem; and saying *‘this is your problem’*.

There has been an improvement in the relationship between the father and his son, with a reduction in arguments.

Being Open

What does the literature tell us?

The literature discusses the importance of openness in establishing an effective relationship between professionals and parents. Altman (2008) and Saint-Jacques et al (2006) identified openness and honesty as being fundamental to the practitioner-parent relationship. Practitioners involved in the Saint-Jacques study agree that speaking openly helps maintain a better relationship with parents and encourages co-operation, as they are more likely to feel part of the process.

Platt (2008) explored the effects of more coercive and less coercive interventions on relationships between social workers and parents. They found that coercion must be backed up by fairness, openness and respect without compromising the necessary social control elements of the role. Many of the parents interviewed through the research valued openness highly, suggesting that where openness is offered by the worker, there is a better chance that it will be reciprocated by the parent. The key components of the social-worker/parents relationship identified by the study were sensitivity, honesty, straightforwardness and the provision of adequate information, listening and accurate understanding.

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- 2.16 Openness emerged as an essential quality needed by Action for Children practitioners in order to develop effective relationships with parents.
- 2.17 Practitioners reported that being direct and clear throughout the support process helps establish good relationships with parents. From the outset, practitioners felt that it is important they are clear with parents about the support on offer and what it is aiming to achieve for them as a family. This helps create transparency in the practitioner–parent relationship, helping to secure engagement and put parents at ease.
- 2.18 Practitioners emphasised the importance of always being clear with parents about the consequences of any safeguarding disclosures or concerns. It is good practice for practitioners across services to make parents aware from the outset that they have a duty to report any safeguarding concerns or disclosures. Families assisted by intensive family support projects are commonly at risk of losing their tenancy or having their children removed from their care. As such, practitioners felt that being consistently open with families about the potential consequences of non-compliance with the service is critical.
- 2.19 A clear focus on safeguarding also helps set the professional boundaries of the relationship between practitioners and parents. Setting clear ground rules from the start makes sure that families know where they stand. This assists in developing trust between practitioners and parents and helps secure and maintain parental engagement.

Example

The mother in this family had no friends, lacked confidence and experienced panic attacks. Due to these issues, her son did not have opportunities to interact with children his own age. The family support worker was open with the mother from the outset of their relationship and told her that there were concerns that her child was not meeting his developmental milestones due to his relative isolation. The family support worker listened to the mother’s views and gave her time to talk about her life and to share the information that she felt able to provide.

After a number of meetings, the family support worker was able to encourage the mother to attend the service to look at the nursery as a potential opportunity for her child. This was the first time that the mother had been out of the house in a long time. The mother visited the nursery and expressed satisfaction with the facilities and a nursery place has been booked for her child. The Action for Children staff will continue to support the parent, encouraging her to attend services.

Building Trust and Mutual Respect

What does the literature tell us?

The literature outlines the importance of establishing a relationship of trust at the engagement stage of the relationship as being crucial in achieving parental involvement (Saint-Jacques, 2006).

DeBoer and Coady (2007) highlight the importance of engaging in small talk to establish comfort and rapport and getting to know the parent as a whole person – in social and life-history. Saint-Jacques et al (2006) highlighted the importance of establishing a relationship of trust at the *'making contact'* stage of the relationship in achieving parental involvement. This was reported to be dependent on the caseworkers' interpersonal skills – practitioners must create a connection and the caseworkers must respect the parents and their family values.

David and Meltzer's (2007) Family Partnership model is based on the notion that the most effective relationship between a parent and 'helper' is a partnership. They emphasise the importance that in order for a partnership to exist there must be mutual trust and respect. Respect is seen as fundamental to this relationship, which was reported to be achieved through demonstrating an interest in other people or being compassionate.

- 2.20 Action for Children practitioners use a range of approaches to building trust and respect with parents, using many of the skills and qualities identified in the Skills Framework in order to achieve this. For example, effective communication and assessment skills are critical in building trust with parents.
- 2.21 **Practitioners felt it was important they used a warm, down-to-earth approach when engaging and working with parents.** Practitioners felt that this was one of the most successful ways to build trust with parents. Parents also reported valuing the warmth and interest portrayed by practitioners across Action for Children services.
- 2.22 **Demonstrating credibility and genuineness to parents is a useful approach to building trust and respect.** Practitioners across case study areas commonly reported drawing on their experience to make sure that parents did not feel alone with their problems.

"They care – it seems like it's more than just a job"

"They ask how you are, what's going on in your life"

“They’re really interested – they remember things that you’ve said and ask what’s happened since they saw you last”

“They’re not just talking the talk, textbook like.. I can call when I need to and get advice and time is spent with me to make sure I get the support I need. The support is based on genuine real experiences which makes it that much more useful and can be used in my home easier” (Parent)

2.23 Practitioners felt displaying a non-judgemental, respectful attitude to parents is important in building trust; a view that was reflected by parents. Practitioners achieve this through not criticising parents in a way that is counter-productive to addressing needs. It is also important for practitioners to allow time for parents to give their opinions, avoid being patronising and demonstrating to parents that their views are important.

Example

During the assessment period, it became evident that both the child and the parent within the family were telling the Action for Children practitioner what they thought she wanted to hear. The parent also admitted that she did not know if she could trust the practitioner.

In order to develop trust, many of the parenting sessions between the practitioner and parent would be spent as listening sessions, where the practitioner gave the parent the opportunity to speak, as the parent did not like to be interrupted when speaking. By taking this approach the parent built up the confidence and trust in the practitioner and started being honest with her.

Once the trusting relationship had been created, the practitioner felt that it was much easier for the family to be honest and voice their opinions. This meant that the family could start to address their problems.

2.24 **Practitioners across case study areas appreciated that building trust with families takes time.** It was widely acknowledged that there is not a standard approach to building trust with parents. Instead, practitioners adapt their approaches and use their experience of working with other families to judge how best to build trust with individual parents and families.

Example

The mother of this family had self-confidence issues and was always in her pyjamas when practitioners visited and rarely took the child out. The worker spent a great deal of time talking to the mother, and helping build her confidence: praising her positives and talking about what she used to do when she went out.

The mother is now up and dressed when the practitioner visits and going out of the home e.g. to the supermarket and taking her child to soft play activities. *“Sometimes they are small but significant outcomes that we achieve.”*

- 2.25 A comprehensive assessment process is an important mechanism for allowing practitioners the time to get to know parents and understand the issues facing them and their families. Practitioners are able to use the assessment process to make sure they are providing the right services for the families and that all needs/issues have been identified. It also allows practitioners to work in partnership with parents to enable them to set their own targets and goals (another mechanism for helping build trust) and for parents to recognise that the service is there to support and work with them to improve outcomes.
- 2.26 The assessment process also provides practitioners with the opportunity to ‘*get behind the label*’ of a family, encouraging them to get to know the parents’ strengths, weaknesses and issues for themselves. This is important in overcoming any pre-conceptions and encouraging practitioners to focus on positive approaches to working with the families.
- 2.27 **Being reliable and proactive also helps build trust and respect between practitioners and parents.** Practitioner’s capability to meet agreements/actions, within set timescales, helps show parents that they are reliable and working to best meet their needs. Practitioners also use this in the relationship process to address where parents may not be meeting their targets/goals or sufficiently moving forward, for example “*I’ve upheld my end of the deal, now it’s your turn*”.

2.28 Keeping parents informed is a strategy used by Action for Children practitioners to build trust and mutual respect. Maintaining ongoing communication, and being open with parents about what is happening helps build parents' trust in the practitioners as individuals and the support they are providing. For example, this may involve updating parents after speaking to another agency on their behalf, or speaking to them about what will be covered in a meeting that they will be attending.

Example

A key worker commented that for one parent she is working with, the parent sees all copies of any documents/papers that she produces on the work they have done. This is to make sure that the parent is clear on what is written about her in all documents and provides her with the opportunity to dispute anything that is written. This also ensures that the parent is prepared for anything that is discussed at meetings, meaning there are no surprises for the parent.

"She knows I never do anything without keeping her informed" (Key Worker)

2.29 Practitioners felt that recognising positive achievements is important in maintaining a good relationship with parents. Many of the families that Action for Children supports are not used to receiving praise. Practitioners felt that recognising parents' positive achievements provides encouragement and helps build confidence.

Example

A key worker commented on the relationship that she had with a parent who had recently had her youngest child placed into care and had been at risk of suicide. She felt that for that parent, giving her praise really helped her want to continue and to fight to get her child back.

"She had her teeth done, had hung her washing out and cleaned the fridge out and I felt it was important to praise her on that, however little those things may seem." (Key Worker)

Empowering and Enabling Families

What does the literature tell us?

MacQueen et al's (2007) literature review of approaches to engaging and supporting parents identified that parents reported feeling powerless when workers did not take on board their point of view or empathise with the difficulties they were facing. Where workers took steps that parents felt were inappropriate to their needs, parents reported feeling unable to challenge the preconceptions of the worker or the action plan formulated from their assessment.

They go on to describe the most successful workers as adopting a flexible and honest approach with families and being able to convey sensitivity to, and empathy with, their problems (Saint-Jacques et al., 2006). Interpersonal and communication skills are highlighted as central to this achievement, including listening to the parent and taking their concerns and fears on board, whilst being able to offer verbal encouragement and convey belief in their abilities (Aldgate and Statham, 2001; Hoskin et al., 2005; Dumbrill, 2006). Workers who convey warmth and understanding are praised by parents (Ghate and Ramella, 2002; Quinton, 2004; Aldgate et al., 2007)

- 2.30 Action for Children practitioners empower and enable families to move forward, addressing issues and working towards improving outcomes for children and young people. Practitioners provide ongoing encouragement to parents throughout the support process, remaining focused on improving outcomes for children and young people. Adopting a positive approach and a '*can do*' attitude even when challenging parents on difficult issues, supports the establishment of a good relationship between practitioners and parents.
- 2.31 Providing practical support to parents helped to build parental independence. It is also a way of resolving issues that families are facing that may be detracting from their ability to be in a position to address more significant issues they are facing. Practitioners provided examples of accompanying parents to appointments, supporting them in their engagement with other services and helping them complete paperwork. This type of practical support makes sure parents feel supported, but also helps empower and enable independence.

Example

The mother in this family lacked confidence and self-esteem; her children were subject to a Child Protection Plan and she would not engage with the parenting group offered by the Action for Children service.

The Action for Children support worker played a key role in building the parent's confidence and independence. The parent accepted the support worker's offer to attend the first parenting group with her. Through this support the mother's confidence increased, her interaction with others improved and she got to know the other mothers at the group.

The support has had a positive impact on the children through the parent putting in place morning routines and the children's attendance at school improved. The mother also began to address the children's poor behaviour, and continued to attend the mother and toddler group. Through the help the family received from the Action for Children service, the children are no longer subject to a child protection plan.

"I have a phobia of needles and my support worker is coming with me today to help me at the dentist. If she's there with the kids outside the room, they don't get that fear of seeing me cry" (Parent)

"When I was really low with depression they sorted out 10 weeks of childcare for me. This gave me time to regain my strength. They saw what was happening and realised I needed help" (Parent)

2.32 Utilising a solution-focused approach helps build parental independence.

Practitioners work with parents to identify the issues they need help with, the outcomes they want to achieve and then set goals or targets. This partnership approach encourages the 'buy-in' of parents, supporting them to take ownership of their issues and goals. Practitioners felt this is a beneficial approach in illustrating to parents they are working with them, in partnership to address negative outcomes. Parents valued this approach to building their confidence, developing decision-making skills, independence and making the most of their abilities.

2.33 Practitioners recognised that service dependency is not conducive to securing long-term outcomes for families. Across all case study areas, there was a strong focus on providing parents with the strategies to 'move on' and practitioners working with parents to develop the skills in order to achieve this.

Example

In the service, there was a strong focus on ensuring that parents were setting goals in their lives. For example, practitioners encouraged and supported parents to progress into training and employment opportunities. Parents at the Action for Children service were also provided with the opportunities to provide peer support to other parents and to engage in volunteering. Practitioners felt that this helped build parents confidence and develop their skills. They also felt that encouraging parents to engage in volunteering and peer support often acted as an initial *'stepping stone'* for parents progressing to more formal education and training opportunities.

"It's not come in and we will do unto you – it's come in and get stuck in. We get long standing members to help other parents." (Children's Centre manager)

"She has helped me to put a plan together for getting back into education. She talked me through my options." (Parent)

"They make suggestions – they don't tell you what to do" (Parent)

2.34 Action for Children services use modelling behaviour as a mechanism for building parents skills and independence. Practitioners reported that parents often need support in understanding how to interact with their children or in relation to positive parenting skills. Practitioners therefore often work closely with parents to model positive behaviour, which they encourage parents to replicate over time.

Action-Focused

What does the literature tell us?

Bell and Smerdon's (2011) literature review sought to explore the role of effective relationships in a range of services. They found that a key element of an effective relationship between a service user and a service provider was a commitment to understand the needs and circumstances of the person using services, with a focus on treating people with dignity and respect and demonstrating that they are 'on their side'. The literature review also identified that demonstrating dynamism and commitment also support the development of a positive relationship.

2.35 Practitioners using an action-focused approach was felt to be fundamental to developing good relationships with parents. Linked to the importance of practitioner reliability and proactiveness (para 2.27) practitioners felt that being action-focused sends out a strong message to parents about the reliability of practitioners, which supports the trust-building process.

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2.36 Practitioners felt that being ‘*action-focused*’ ensures that that their practice is fully focused on supporting families to address needs and improve outcomes. This involves practitioners working with parents to prioritise issues and then working effectively to resolve the issues. Practitioners may support families in obtaining support from other services, or in some instances put pressure on other services where needed to meet their responsibilities in respect of a particular family.

2.37 This ‘*action-focused*’ approach to practice helps practitioners maintain momentum in the support they are providing to families, ensuring that the focus on goals, targets and outcomes to be achieved does not slip. Practitioners reported that this way of working also helps demonstrate to parents that they are focused on making things happen.

Example

The mother in this family has two children and had previously suffered from post-natal depression. She had some confidence issues and rarely left the house. The mother was also suffering from a severe back condition, which was having a negative effect on her ability to interact and play with her children.

The family support worker worked with the mother to identify appropriate support for her and her children. She provided ongoing encouragement to the mother that she could address issues and move forward. She encouraged the mother to recognise and seek treatment for her back condition, which she had previously been reluctant to do; helped her complete forms to claim disability benefits; and encouraged her to attend a programme, which aimed to get her back into employment, education or training.

Listening and providing reassurance was an important aspect of the relationship the family support worker developed with the mother, particularly where the mother displayed anger about her situation and health condition. In these situations, the family support worker gave her the time and space she needed and made sure the mother knew she was there for her if she needed her.

There have been positive benefits for the children through the support provided by the service. The mother is now able to take a more active role with her children as she is receiving treatment for her back. Furthermore, through her involvement in the nurturing and relaxation courses, she learnt useful techniques, which she has been able to put into practice in her own approach to parenting.

Both the family support worker and the mother were positive about the outcomes achieved through the support provided by the service and the positive relationship they had established: *“She’s given me more faith in people. She’s built my confidence to move forward, to take action – especially about my back and housing.”* (Mother)

2.38 Parents also valued the ability for Action for Children practitioners to “*make things happen*”. Examples included practitioners proactively seeking information for parents and supporting them in obtaining alternative housing.

“My kids used to be late for school and the support worker would say to me ‘why don’t I come round at quarter past seven in the morning and make sure you’re up and do that for a week then you’re used to getting up at that time’. Things like that have really helped me get in a routine”. (Parent)

“They helped me get a house. I was staying at a hostel then staying at my gran’s in a one bedroom house, then they helped me get a two bedroom house, from then on they helped me get a four bedroomed house so I’ve got a better chance of getting custody of my other three kids” (Parent)

“If you ask a question, you always get an answer and they get back to you if they don’t know the answer” (Parent)

“I’d been asking {another service} for new carpets for the house for two months. The {Action for Children practitioner member} got involved and I’d got them in two weeks!” (Parent)

Practitioner’s Ability to Interact Positively with Children and Young People

2.39 Practitioners’ ability to interact positively and voluntarily with children and young people ensures that practitioners are able to recognise and evidence the impact of parental support on children and young people. It is also important in developing good relationship with parents. Practitioners felt that being able to interact well with children and young people helps put parents at ease about the support that is being offered and relieves any concerns they may have had about engaging in a service.

2.40 Positive interaction between practitioners and children is regularly used as a way of breaking down barriers and as a basis to help develop relationships with parents. It also allows practitioners to use modelling behaviour, to encourage parents to recognise and mimic positive interactions with their children.

2.41 Parents also valued the ability for Action for Children practitioners to interactive positively with their children. For example, in the Action for Children sites visited, the parents interviewed praised the practitioners for their willingness to interact with their children. Practitioners at the site commented that often parents are afraid to come to the Children’s Centre and therefore part of breaking down these barriers is to interact with the children.

“When she comes to visit, she considers that the children will need entertaining so she brings toys with her ... she talks to the children as well.” (Parent)

Example

The young mother in this family was living with an older partner. There had been domestic abuse between the man and his previous partner and the children in the family were subject to a child protection plan because of this. There were some issues related to one of the children’s development, the interaction between the mother and this child and the child’s engagement in play activities.

The family support worker commented that she often sat on the floor to play with the child. At first the mother would not sit on the floor or join in, but eventually, following regular visits, the mother started to join in. The family support worker said this helped her develop a relationship with the child and the mother who was then encouraged to start attending the service.

The domestic abuse resurfaced in the family. However, the support provided by the service had provided the mother with the confidence to leave with the children and go to a refuge, ensuring that the children were safe. The family support worker did not feel the mother would have done that without the relationship they had developed.

Ability to Facilitate Parents Understanding

2.42 Practitioners work with parents to help them understand terminology, jargon or action in a way that is not patronising – this is an important skill. For example, this may involve practitioners using non-technical terminology to ensure that parents easily understand it; or making sure that they are clear in their explanations to parents, and then look for confirmation from parents that they have understood what they have said. This helps ensure practitioners are relating to parents at an appropriate level and are not communicating information to parents in a way that could be confusing.

Example

In a case conference a professional from another service was trying to explain that there was a concern with the child's sight. The parent kept saying "*but he can see, he can see*" and was getting upset. The Action for Children parenting worker interrupted to explain to the parent that what the professional meant was that there was some difficulty with the child being able to focus.

"The {professional} wasn't able to explain and relate to the parent appropriately, but the parenting worker was able to do this for them". (Action for Children Manager)

2.43 Practitioners also often have a role in presenting difficult information to parents in a way that they are able to understand; in a sensitive and appropriate way. A stakeholder from an agency working closely with an Action for Children service provided an example of a family who normally reacted negatively to receiving advice from '*professionals*'. However, the way in which the Action for Children practitioner explained the issues that needed to be addressed meant that the parents were more receptive to the advice provided as it was done in a way that parents could understand and did not feel that they were being blamed. As a result, they were more willing to engage with the practitioners to address the issues.

2.44 Practitioners also reported that many parents are aware of technical terms or phrases they can use to suggest they understand them, as a way of presenting a positive image to professionals. For example, this may involve a parent using the term '*safeguarding*' when speaking to practitioners to suggest understanding of the term and its implications. Practitioners have a role in working with parents to unpick their understanding of these terms.

3 WHAT OUTCOMES DID THE CASE STUDY AREAS ACHIEVE FOR CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE?

- 3.1 Outcomes data was collected across the five case study areas to provide an understanding of the outcomes achieved by Action for Children services. It is important to highlight that these findings are from selected areas and are therefore not necessarily representative of Action for Children services overall. However, this analysis does illustrate the positive outcomes that are achieved for families through the delivery of Action for Children services.
- 3.2 It is also important to note that the purpose of this research **was not** to evidence the link between the creation of effective relationships with vulnerable parent and improved outcomes for children and young people. Rather, its purpose was to identify how effective relationships are achieved given that a wide range of existing research establishes the importance of practitioner/client relationships in achieving positive outcomes.
- 3.3 By selecting case study sites that have an established reputation for delivering improved outcomes for children and young people the research has sought to unpick the contribution that a good relationship with parents makes to achieving those outcomes.

The Link between an Effective Practitioner–Parent Relationship and Improved Outcomes for Children and Young People

- 3.4 Robust evidence of a causal link between effective relationships and improved outcomes is limited. Nevertheless, there is considerable literature, which points to the importance of the relationship between practitioners and clients in achieving outcomes.
- 3.5 Most recently, Community Links’ ‘Deep Value’ literature review (Bell and Smerdon 2011) identifies that where relationships are effective there is evidence that these increase the likelihood of achieving positive outcomes.

- 3.6 Edelman’s (2004) literature review on relationship-based approaches to early intervention identifies that the ultimate impact of intervention is dependent not only on the expertise of practitioners, but also on "*the quality and continuity of the personal relationship established between the service provider and the family that is being served*". The review also evidences that the relationship between a parent and service provider has been shown to be a potential predictor of the success of intervention (Kelly 1999).
- 3.7 Davis and Meltzer’s (2007) Family Partnership Model is based on the notion that the most effective relationship between parents and ‘helpers’ is a partnership. There is evidence of outcomes in the use of this model. For example, Dave and Rushton (2002) found that improved communication had a number of effects on outcomes within healthcare. For families of children with severe and multiple disabilities, improved communication was reported to lead to significant improvements in family social support, maternal self-esteem, emotional adaptation, parental relationships, children’s behaviour problems and children’s development.
- 3.8 Other evidence suggests that empathy, respect and genuineness are likely to determine between 25–40% of the outcome (Patterson, 2004). Hoagwood (2005) found evidence of the parent-helper alliance being a significant predictor of service engagement, dropout, satisfaction and the uptake of advised parenting skills, which were predictive of child outcomes.

Outcomes for Children and Young People

- 3.9 The following outcomes for children and young people were achieved through the support provided by the Action for Children case study areas:
- improvement in children and young people’s attendance at school;
 - children and young people are safe;
 - improved emotional well-being; and
 - child and young person development.

Improvement in Children and Young People’s Attendance at School

3.10 The data across case study areas shows improvements in children and young people’s attendance at school through their involvement in Action for Children services.

Example
Outcomes from the January–March 2011 report card showed that 100% of children’s school attendance had improved during their involvement in the service.

3.11 Action for Children services also contribute to making sure that children and young people’s attendance at school is at a satisfactory level. In a service providing intensive family support, three quarters (75%) of children had achieved satisfactory attendance at school at the end of their involvement in the service. For an early intervention case study (Case Study A) over four-fifths (82%) of cases on exit from the service achieved satisfactory attendance at school.

Children and Young People are Safe

3.12 For some services provided by Action for Children, the potential for children within families to be taken into care is a significant risk on entry to the service. For intensive family support services in particular, there is often a strong focus on reducing the risk that children will need to be taken into care, through working with parents to reduce the risks in the family situation.

3.13 Outcomes data collected suggests that some Action for Children services are playing a role in ensuring the children and young people are safe. For example, in one of the intensive family support services (Case Study B), over nine-tenths of children (91%) remained in the family home through their involvement in the service (January–March 2011 Report Card).

Improved Emotional Well-Being

3.14 Action for Children services contribute to improvements in children and young people’s self-esteem, confidence and coping strategies. For example, an intensive family support service (Case Study E) reported improvements in the confidence and self-esteem of children, young people and their families on exit from the service.

Example

The 2009–10 report card indicated that 78% of children reported an improved mood and self-esteem and 86% reported an increase in emotional awareness and appropriate expression of feeling from their involvement in the service.

“Things started to get easier for me when I started coming here to Action for Children. Now I think about things more before I do them. My attitude and behaviour is changing. My attitude is more relaxed, I can manage my anger and temper better. I am friendly with people. I get on with everyone now. I have loads of mates.” (Young Person, Early Intervention Service, Annual report 2009)

Child and Young Person Development

3.15 Improvements in child development in relation to physical development, social skills, speech and language skills and listening and concentration was evidenced in some case study areas. Parents who attended the Children’s Centre (Case Study C) reported on improved social and emotional outcomes for their children, for example, greater interaction with other children, improved speech and increased social contact.

Example

Child development is assessed for the Flying Start programme using standard assessments. These show improvements, with most children assessed at 3 years as being in line with or scoring higher than their chronological age.

Outcomes assessment for cases at one of the Family Centres show:

- more than 70% of cases show improved health and development and social skills;
- over 40% of cases show improved contribution to the learning environment.

Outcomes assessment for closed cases at the Young Carers’ project shows improvements in emotional or mental wellbeing; social skills; and quality of life for 70% or more of young carers.

Outcomes identified through parental feedback/assessment suggested that

Example

children are better prepared for school and they had noticed improvements in children's language and communication skills and differences in children's overall development.

Outcomes for Families

3.16 The following outcomes for families were achieved through the support provided by the Action for Children case study areas:

- more stable housing and living conditions;
- improvements in relationship between parents and children;
- improvements in family stability; and
- improved parental confidence and self-esteem.

More Stable Housing and Living Conditions

3.17 A number of the Action for Children services involved in the research are contributing to more stable housing and living conditions for families that they were working with. The intensive family support projects in particular have an important role in improving home conditions for families and working with them to achieve more secure tenancies. For example, the January – March 2011 Report Card for an intensive family support case study (Case Study B) showed that home conditions improved for 75% of families and 82% of families' tenancies were secured.

Example

In the intensive family support service, of the 8 closed cases during the 2010–11 financial year the risk of homelessness was reduced for 75% (6) of these families. In addition, all the families exited from the service during this period were reported to have suitable accommodation.

Improvement in Relationships between Parents and Children

3.18 Across the case study areas Action for Children services contribute to improvements in parenting skills, communication between parents and children and reduced conflict in the home.

Example

Outcomes from the November 2009–10 report card highlighted that:

- 89% of families reported improvements in communication;
- 89% of families reported less conflict/arguing at home;
- 89% of families reported an improvement in behaviours and were better able to deal with conflict more appropriately.

In addition, there were improvements in parenting capacity. Of the 34 families that were exited from support there was an improvement from admission where the average score was 2, which meant there were a lot of difficulties, to an average score of 6 “doing well” on exit.

“My parenting skills and living skills have improved greatly, my confidence in dealing with difficult situations has improved and my whole outlook is totally different. I feel much more confident and my self esteem is much better and I try to think more positively about life.”(Parent)

“I learned techniques through the course, such as giving praise. You get back what you put it, the nurturing course helped with this.”(Parent)

“Prior to us doing this work with Action for Children trying to get an address out of our daughter (who’s 14 and doing normal teenage stuff) when she was going to friends was really difficult... [Her response was] ‘oh you don’t trust me’ and all this. But she’s just text me [Mum get’s out her mobile and reads a text from her daughter] ‘Mum, can I stay out tonight, blah, blah, blah, with her friend because they’re going to babysit and not going to be back until late, can I stay as long as I give you the address?’ And I was like [shocked face], coz last week I said she could stay out as long as I’ve got the address and she was like ‘yeah not a problem’....and sent me a text with her friend’s address. A couple of months ago we would have been back and forth with texts just trying to wheedle a little more information out of her.”(Parent)

Improvements in Family Stability

3.19 For some of the families that Action for Children services work with drug and alcohol issues are prevalent and often families are in significant debt. Outcomes evidence collected from a number of the case study areas suggests that the services play a role in helping families to address drug/alcohol issues and provide support to address their debt issues.

Example

Outcomes from the January–March 2011 Report card highlighted that drug and alcohol issues were addressed for 50% of families who had exited the service and debts had been managed in 82% of families.

'If it hadn't been for them I wouldn't have stopped drinking, I would be in prison and I definitely wouldn't have my house or my daughter.' (Parent)

Improved Parental Confidence and Self-Esteem

3.20 There was evidence across the case study areas that involvement in Action for Children services has helped support parents to improve their confidence and self-esteem. For example, a number of parents who attended one Children's Centre reported improved self-confidence and self-esteem through regularly attendance at the Children's Centre. Two-thirds who were involved in a consultation exercise reported that they were more confident in contributing to groups or discussions and that their opinion will be listened to.

Example

A parent commented that she had low self-esteem and confidence and had often felt very isolated. She had worked with her key worker on a one-to-one basis to build up her confidence.

"She noticed I was closing down and helped me to get counselling. She is helping me to build up my self-esteem and confidence and I'm feeling much stronger." (Parent)

4 WHAT WORKS WELL IN ACTION FOR CHILDREN'S APPROACH TO WORKING WITH PARENTS?

- 4.1 The case study research identified a number of important features of Action for Children's approach to working with parents and families, which help create good relationships between practitioners and parents. Parents gave their views on what they felt was different about the support they received from Action for Children services compared their experiences of other services.

Consistency in Approach

What does the literature tell us?

Research by the Office of the Children's Commissioner (2010) explored the views and experiences of children and young people in relation to reasons for resistance from families receiving child protection services and the type of practice that would be most effective.

The research highlighted that those who had had no previous experience of social work services, particularly those who were recent immigrants to this country, said that every social worker they had seen had done things differently. They thought this individual approach was valuable, but it left them unclear about what to expect in terms of a "*way of working*". The unreliability and changes they experienced meant that a number of people turned up to meetings expecting someone who they knew would be there, only to find there was a new person. This made it difficult to make and maintain relationships between families and social workers and could lead to inconsistencies in practice.

- 4.2 **Parents praised Action for Children for the consistency of support provided.** They valued that practitioners always do what they say they will and that the support provided is always consistent. Parents felt they always knew where they stood with practitioners, which helped build trust and allowed them to develop a good relationship. Practitioners reflected this view, reporting that consistency in support was integral in being able to effectively engage and maintain positive relationships with parents.

- 4.3 Parents also valued consistency in the practitioners they worked with. Where possible families' were allocated to work with one practitioner to make sure that there was consistency in support for families. However, parents appreciated that if there was a need for them to work with a different practitioner (e.g. annual leave, change of job etc) then the messages and approach taken by the new practitioner did not differ from that received previously. In one case study area, a number of parents commented that it felt that all practitioners in the service were *'on the same page'*.

"If you ask one member of staff something and then you ask another you'll always get the same response. It's like they've all had the same training and they're all singing from the same hymn sheet." (Parent)

Example

This family had a history of working with statutory agencies and there had been issues with staff turnover (i.e. they had worked with multiple practitioners within the same agency). This meant that they were repeatedly asked to outline the issues they faced, which the mother in the family found particularly distressing.

The practitioner was able to offer the family the reassurance that she would be the key worker from Action for Children who would be involved with the family. This assurance of a key worker and the consistent team approach helped allay the family's fears and meant they were more receptive to working with the service and achieving outcomes for their children.

Flexibility and Non-Prescriptive Delivery

What does the literature tell us?

The Munro review (2011) critically identified that increased prescription for social workers has created an imbalance, detracting from the importance of forming relationships with children and families to understand and help them.

Braun et al (2006) highlighted the importance of time and acknowledgement that different people will need partnership to be developed in different ways and therefore it is important to tailor support accordingly to address this. Braun (2006) stated that for some parents home-visiting may be the only way to learn to trust the workers, for others this may be the last thing they want. This is why services and menus of local services offered to parents must be designed to be flexible and responsive to parents needs, rather than offering a one-size fits all programme.

- 4.4 The ability for Action for Children services to provide flexible, needs-led delivery is a significant driver in their ability to meet families' needs and improve outcomes for children and young people. This flexibility also greatly assists practitioners to develop successful relationships with parents.
- 4.5 Developing a package of support in partnership with families is a strong feature of the approach taken by Action for Children services. Although with some level of prescription, there is an ethos across case study areas of providing autonomous, flexible delivery and a willingness to seek new and creative solutions to achieving the best outcomes for families. Practitioners reported on the importance of engaging with families and providing support at the stage they were at, in partnership with them. This was a view reflected by parents who valued the strong focus placed on partnership; particularly that Action for Children practitioners worked with them to set goals and targets and identify solutions to their problems.

Example

The child in this family was presenting challenging, attention seeking behaviour that her grandmother struggled to manage (her mother was in prison). It was a challenge to get the grandmother to attend the parenting group provided by Action for Children, but the parenting worker succeeded using a number of strategies:

- overcoming barriers: organising transport and providing solutions to all other barriers presented until the grandmother eventually agreed to attend;
- persistence: letters, phone calls etc;
- spending time, asking how things were for her;
- using knowledge of the child to draw the grandmother into conversations in the group;
- building up a relationship with the grandmother and creating a link with her as a person, not an organisation: *"We're expecting you to come, we will be disappointed if you don't...."*;
- seeking information to understand what might cause the grandmother stress within the group setting, e.g. ability to read handouts at parenting groups.

The support provided by the service and the relationships developed helped build the Grandmother's confidence and identified strategies to deal with difficult behaviour. This has led to an improved relationship between the grandmother and the child.

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“We start where the family are and work together” (Action for Children manager)

“The {other agency} come to your front door and they say right you need to do this and it has got to be done by this time and we’ll be back at this time and they’re sneaky about it. Whereas Action for Children before they open your case will write down what your needs are, like it could be ‘I need to do this, I need to do that’.. they don’t tell you what you need to do, they take you to your goals and then past it. They help you learn every time you have a problem not to paper over the cracks but you learn how to solve it.”

- 4.6 Equity and equality in service delivery is also important in ensuring that practitioners are aware of issues that may affect parental engagement in support and can adopt a flexible delivery approach to address this. Practitioner’s ability to respond appropriately to cultural issues in order to provide accessible support is crucial. This may involve appropriately matching practitioners to parents.
- 4.7 Action for Children services reported that they consider how they match practitioners to parents in terms of experience, background and personality. They felt that this is important in ensuring that parents felt at ease with the practitioners they were working with, maximising the ability to build a positive relationship and the outcomes to be achieved.
- 4.8 Practitioners valued having the time to develop relationships with parents, which they reported is beneficial in helping to secure long-term engagement and make sure that the support offered is meeting families’ needs. Allowing time for parents and practitioners to get to know each other assists in creating a strong foundation for the professional relationship, supporting the development of trust and allowing parents to feel at ease with practitioners.
- 4.9 Parents spoke positively about Action for Children practitioners making the time to get to know them and providing support when they needed it. Examples cited by parents included not feeling that practitioners were rushed for time when they are working directly with them, or feeling that a practitioner had gone out of their way to help them.

“I was having a really rough time with my ex-partner and the Action for Children worker showed a lot of support. One morning after I’d dropped my child off at school, she arranged to come and take me for a cup of tea and she just sat there for a good few hours and really listened to me, which you don’t really get from any other agency. They’re not interested in what you’re feeling or whatever’s going on in your world. It was a real turning point for me with her and my trust for her, which made it a much easier relationship.” (Parent)

4.10 Delivering services in flexible locations that encourage families to feel comfortable is conducive to establishing good relationships. Action for Children practitioners reported on the importance of considering the impact of a particular location on a parent’s ability to engage in the support provided, particularly in terms of feelings of safety and allowing them to be open to the support. It is important for families to feel at ease in the location where the support is taking place and this may therefore involve practitioners meeting parents in a location that may or may not be their home. Practitioners reported using coffee shops, libraries and community centres as locations for the delivery of support.

“You need to allow a parent to feel comfortable to ensure that they engage positively with you. They need to feel safe before they can be open and trusting.” (Practitioner)

“I started to work with a young parent who was living at home with her family – she suffered domestic abuse from her father and her partner wasn’t trusting of others. She found it difficult to be open in that environment and it took a while for her to be open even in a safe environment.” (Practitioner)

4.11 Although there are clear timescales set for the support provided by Action for Children services, there is flexibility in these timescales. Case study areas appear less constrained by the need to work with families over a set time and instead there is a much greater focus on ensuring that the needs of the family were met.

4.12 Practitioners adapt families’ support plans as needs are met or issues arise throughout the life of the support. Ongoing review and reflection of an individual family’s progress and support needs is common practice. This process makes sure that practitioners are meeting families’ needs and allows them to make an informed decision about the appropriateness of exiting a family from support. Practitioners emphasised that they will not exit a family from a service if they feel they are not ready. For example, in the presence of outstanding family issues or support requirements there are ongoing discussions internally about the need to refer on to other services or to continue to work with the family.

Example

The service undertakes a range of feedback activity to gather families’ views of service delivery etc. The support and service provided is reviewed with service users every 6–8 weeks. Service users have full input and can change the way the service is delivered (e.g. changing appointment time and/or venues). Service users also complete exit questionnaires to gather their views on service provision and any issues identified are reported back on a quarterly basis to the services. Action for Children develops their service accordingly, to ensure positive change results from the suggestions, ideas or areas for improvement identified. In addition, practitioners contact families (or the referral agency) six months after they exit support to provide an update on whether positive outcomes have been maintained. By having this update with exited families Action for Children can actively see what needs to be built on or changed to achieve positive outcomes for children, young people and families in the longer term.

Facilitating Multi-Agency Services

What does the literature tell us?

Research shows that a positive relationship between different services brings greater knowledge and experience to family assessment and results in a more informed package of support. Moran et al (2007) found that multi-agency working leads to increased understanding of other organisations’ roles and ways of working, in turn leading to earlier referrals and a less stigmatizing experience for families, hence leading to better outcomes for children and families. In particular, personal contact with members of social services enabled partner agencies to make referrals more speedily and appropriately. Tarleton, B, Ward (2006) found that co-ordinated, multi-professional, multi-agency working was key to maximising the positive impact of different services on the lives of parents with learning difficulties.

4.13 Regular, ongoing contact between Action for Children and other agencies and professionals is central to the support provided to families. For many families involved in Action for Children services there are multiple services involved. As such, it is important that practitioners are able to develop links with other agencies to provide support and are also seeking opportunities for collaborative working.

Example

The practitioners in the service link into a wide range of agencies and understand the processes and procedures required to access support from those organisations. They use this knowledge to support parents to access support and services from these agencies. Practitioners felt that having such knowledge meant that the families they worked with had a better chance of accessing appropriate support (e.g. because forms were completed correctly).

4.14 Across case study areas, there is a strong focus on developing links with other agencies to assist in providing support for individual families and to increase practitioners' awareness of other services in order to enhance delivery in the future. For example, this may involve Action for Children services inviting agencies to provide input at an internal team meeting about the focus of their work and the support they provide. This has the benefit of maximising service links to support families, whilst also providing the opportunity for each service to find out more about the work they do, which helps facilitate multi-agency working in the future.

4.15 Practitioners also reported using joint visits and sessions with other agencies as a way of facilitating parents' engagement. For example, this may involve an Action for Children family support worker accompanying a health visitor on a home visit to a family to introduce the support they could provide. This approach is very effective in allowing parents to feel comfortable about engaging with services.

Example

New links with other services are created when family support workers are engaged in supporting a family where specific needs are expressed and therefore new links need to be developed to meet these needs. When contact is initially established with new agencies, a representative is invited to attend the internal Action for Children team meeting where they explain their role to practitioners, the services they provide for families, whilst also learning about the services and practitioners available at the Children's Centre.

- 4.16 **Action for Children practitioners often play a central role in effectively co-ordinating support with other agencies.** They regularly facilitate multi-agency meetings and adopt a lead professional or key worker role. When playing such a role practitioners felt it is important to achieve a balance between involving other agencies who need to support the family and ensuring that families are not overwhelmed by too much agency involvement. Action for Children practitioners effectively co-ordinate support by clarifying responsibilities across agencies and appropriately managing the level of service involvement with a family.
- 4.17 The role of practitioners in facilitating multi-agency services also involves supporting parents with other agencies where a parent has had a difficult relationship previously. This may involve trying to resolve issues and move things forward for the family.

Example

The mother in this family had a poor relationship with her child's school. The practitioner worked with the teachers, the school principal and other support staff in the school to re-establish and maintain their relationship with the mother, which in turn resulted in improved outcomes for the child.

The practitioner liaised closely with school staff and the parent to achieve a positive outcome. This included regular meetings, reports and more frequent communication between both parties.

The child's well-being and engagement in education has improved as he is now attending school regularly. The parent's confidence is also restored in her child's school.

Supporting Service Accountability

- 4.18 Action for Children are effective in making sure that other services involved with families are being held to account for their responsibilities for families. Practitioners do not shy away from challenging other agencies where necessary, reflecting the strong child and action-focused ethos of the Action for Children services. This is particularly evident in intensive support services, where families are likely to have multi-agency involvement and a support plan, which sets out clear actions for other agencies. Action for Children, when acting as a lead agency, often play an important role in ensuring that all agencies are signed up and adhering to support plans.

4.19 This occasionally leads to a need for Action for Children practitioners to be very directive with other agencies to make sure they are meeting their responsibilities. This means that regular chasing of other agencies is common practice for Action for Children practitioners. Practitioners felt that this is an important element of their role in ensuring that they are fulfilling their responsibilities for families and ensuring that the momentum of support is not lost.

4.20 Parents also recognised and valued the role Action for Children plays in making other services accountable, and seemed to view this very much as ‘fighting their corner’.

“When you go to a panel meeting they judge you. They don’t accept your word, that’s why you need someone fighting your corner.” (Parent)

“The key workers don’t judge you and don’t make threats”. (Parent)

What else do Action for Children do well?

4.21 Parents also reported that Action for Children are:

- positive and proactive in their approach to working with parents and families;
- felt to have a genuine interest in families – friendly and caring;
- easy to trust and talk to, encouraging parents to feel at ease.

“She {the practitioner} spoke to her family exactly the same way as she speaks to us. To me that shows that she treats and respects everyone the same.” (Parent)

“The more I spoke to her, the more I felt relaxed. She’s quite funny, down to earth.” (Parent)

5 FACILITATORS IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF EFFECTIVE RELATIONSHIPS WITH PARENTS

5.1 The case study research identified a number of facilitators at an organisational, delivery and family level that support the development of effective relationships between Action for Children practitioners and parents.

Organisational Level

5.2 Organisational facilitators that help support the development of good relationships between practitioners and parents include:

- management commitment and ethos;
- practitioner training and development;
- effective supervision;
- creating a welcoming environment.

Management Commitment and Ethos

What does the literature tell us?

The importance of strong, open management in a multi agency environment is highlighted by research such as Moran et al (2007), which highlights the time consuming and ‘trial and error’ nature of learning between agencies. These contextual features make supportive management practices more important because it is necessary to understand the ‘reality’ in order to strengthen organisational approaches and strategies to support parents. The research suggests that this can be achieved through open and ongoing consultation with front-line workers.

5.3 Managers and practitioners felt that developing a service culture whereby practitioners feel supported, trusted and empowered is helpful in creating strong relationships with parents.

- 5.4 Managers felt that an *'open door'* management approach helps create an environment, which is supportive to practitioners having new ideas, and encourages ongoing communication. Managers play a major role in ensuring that practitioners remain focused on what the support they are providing is aiming to achieve for families and in particular that the focus remains on improving outcomes for children and young people. Formal supervision and line management provides opportunities for practitioners to engage with their managers. However, the *'open door'* approach is an ethos that is integral to daily practice and practitioners feel comfortable to approach managers on an informal basis when required.
- 5.5 Practitioners generally have the autonomy to manage their own caseloads and the independence to work with families to identify needs and seek solutions to meeting those needs. Practitioners valued the trust provided by managers on a daily basis, whilst appreciating that they are still able to raise any concerns or seek help from them if required. For example, one Action for Children manager encourages practitioners to make *'on the spot'* financial decisions e.g. arranging a taxi, or booking a place in the crèche for a parent or child if she is out of the office, rather than holding up such decisions which may be detrimental to practitioners' establishing effective relationships with parents. Providing this autonomy helps practitioners to react quickly to situations, maintaining momentum and demonstrating action to families.
- 5.6 This highlights the supportive environment created by the case study sites.

Example: Intensive Family Support Service (Case Study E)

The practitioner team are positive about the autonomy and the trust they are given to manage and deliver their case-loads on a daily basis. The key workers within the service have clear professional boundaries within which they operate, but are given opportunities by managers to take an adaptable and creative approach when working with families. Practitioners recognised that support was available from the management team if required but also that they would be *'reined back in'* if necessary. Practitioners have monthly supervision and family support plans are reviewed (with supervisors) on a six-weekly basis to ensure that support is continuing to meet families needs.

Practitioner Training and Development

What does the literature tell us?

Ongoing training and development is important because of the complexity of relationship dynamics, varied family contexts and the multi-agency environment that practitioners work within. Practitioners working with families therefore require a wide range of skills, knowledge and experience to effectively and safely develop relationships with families. Several research studies highlight the importance of training and development. Moran et al (2004) emphasises that successful interventions are developed from a strong theory base, with clearly stated aims, whilst Lipsey and Wilson (1998) place great importance on appropriately trained and skilled practitioners to achieve effective outcomes. Training required is both generic and specialist. For example, Fletcher (2008) outlines the importance of practitioner training in order to ensure the effective engagement of fathers.

- 5.7 Providing formal and informal opportunities for practitioner training and development is common practice across case study areas. Access to external and internal training for practitioners is wide ranging and practitioners' involvement in Action for Children training provision was highlighted across case study areas. Safeguarding, first aid and the induction programme were all cited as common training undertaken by practitioners.
- 5.8 Managers also work with practitioners to identify individual development areas; encourage them to identify their own training and development interests and seek opportunities to meet these interests. Specialist training is also provided to practitioners where required, for example, to allow practitioners to build expertise or knowledge in a particular area.
- 5.9 Creating good local authority and other external links was felt to be beneficial in increasing practitioners' access to training opportunities. Practitioners generally have access to specific training opportunities depending on the service context in which they are working and their professional role. For example, a Children Centre reported accessing relevant training through the local authority Early Year's service on effective planning and the Early Years Foundation Stage.

5.10 Involving practitioners in local authority or multi-agency forums or panels also provides good development opportunities. Practitioners attendance on local forums/panels helps increase their awareness of local policies and priorities and provides information which can then be cascaded to colleagues and inform service delivery. Involvement in forums and panels also improves services' knowledge about the availability of local training. For example, an intensive family support service reported on the value of developing links with the local authority through becoming members of local strategic and operational boards. This increased the service's awareness and access to training opportunities locally.

Example: Intensive Family Support Service (Case Study E)

Managers proactively seek training and development opportunities for practitioners through the links they have developed with the local authority. Practitioners regularly contribute to local forums and groups. For example, one of the project workers is a member of one of the working groups helping to develop local protocols regarding underage sexual activity.

5.11 Providing comprehensive formal and informal training and development opportunities has benefits in improving practitioners' practice, which has a subsequent impact on the relationships they develop with parents. It allows practitioners to build their knowledge of other agencies and build their practice knowledge. For example, this might be in relation to working with parents or families with particular needs, which practitioners can then apply to their own practice in the future.

5.12 Case study areas also highlighted the importance of shared learning. It is common for practitioners who have been on specific courses, or have undertaken development activities to bring back materials or report back to other colleagues. This helps create a learning environment across the service and ensures that any knowledge or expertise gained is shared across team members.

Example: Early Intervention Service (Case Study A)

The team have engaged in a wide range of training including safeguarding, first aid and risk assessment. Recent training provided practitioners with information on working with vulnerable adults and supporting people with mental health issues. The training introduced practitioners to different mental health issues and ways to work with parents and children experiencing problems. Practitioners reported that by receiving regular training they have a current awareness of other agencies' criteria, processes and effective practice. As a result, they are better able to advise families on how to navigate through referral criteria or complete relevant forms, which helps foster parental confidence in the relationship.

Effective Supervision

5.13 Providing shadowing opportunities is also common across Action for Children services, particularly for new or less experienced practitioners. This involves less experienced practitioners shadowing their colleagues to gain hands-on experience of working with families. This is a beneficial process in building practitioner skills in working with and developing relationships with parents.

What does the literature tell us?

Research (Broadhurst et al., 2010) suggests that feelings of helplessness by practitioners can be common and that professionals can be reluctant to admit their fears to colleagues and managers and to ask for appropriate help, which can hinder effective safeguarding work. It therefore recommends that systems that support safe working practice and encourage open and honest sharing of fears need to be in place. Supervision is the primary mechanism for ensuring effective oversight and review of practice and should allow practitioners a forum to share their anxieties.

Davis and Meltzer (2007) highlight the importance of ongoing and regular contact with someone who is adequately trained and is competent in providing facilitative management and supervision. This involves providing a forum in which individuals can consider their performance in relation to their service role and their own needs personally and professionally in order to be effective. A literature review by Williams and Churchill (2006) reinforces this, reporting that the erosion of interpersonal barriers entails a closer and more reciprocal relationship, creating challenges and demands on practitioners that need to be supported by mentoring and supervision (Aldridge 1994; Smith & Gray 2001). Managers provided supervision and informal debriefing sessions after visits to ensure that families did not transfer their problems onto workers. This

What does the literature tell us?

supervision was particularly important, as there was such a close match between families and workers, in terms of ethnicity, gender and parenthood, which might otherwise lead to over-identification (Kelly et al., 2000; Taggart et al., 2000).

5.14 Effective supervision is critical in supporting practitioners to improve outcomes for children, young people and families and to develop good relationships with parents. Practitioners felt that it provides them with the opportunity to discuss individual cases, raise issues and find solutions to those issues with their supervisor. Allocating sufficient time for meaningful supervision is of key importance; particularly for practitioners working with families with complex and multiple needs.

Example: Intensive Family Support Service (Case Study B)

Supervision is critical to the work undertaken by the service due to the varied nature of the families involved and the work they deliver (safeguarding, female offenders, anti-social behaviour). Practitioners have supervision at least monthly and more frequently if there are child protection issues and both practitioners and managers agreed that this is necessary and extremely useful. Supervision sessions are relatively prescribed and follow a set pro-forma. Monthly supervision provides the opportunity to review cases in-depth, to provide updates on family's progress and to identify areas for practitioner development. Practitioners also have regular dialogue with managers and support is always available to address immediate issues or concerns. Both formal and informal supervision is highly valued by practitioners and they felt it was a major contributing factor in how practitioners developed their skills to promote effective relationships with parents.

Delivery Level

5.15 There are a number of delivery level facilitators, which help support the creation of good relationships between practitioners and parents.

Team Development and Support

What does the literature tell us?

Research by Edelman (2004) found that the key ingredients of effective practitioner–parent relationships include building authentic relationships by being direct, honest and supportive, and having consistent, regular meetings for team members. Maintaining close communication, identifying issues to address, and participating in group problem–solving and decision–making were also felt to contribute to the development of effective relationships.

- 5.16 There is a strong team ethos across the case study areas visited and practitioners reported positively on the importance of working together to best meet the needs of families and to improve outcomes for children and young people. There was clear agreement that is beneficial in supporting the development of effective relationships with parents.
- 5.17 Practitioners have a strong respect for and value their colleagues' backgrounds, experience and particular strengths and a good awareness of how they can use other practitioners to assist with their own cases. This is through, for example, sharing ideas, issues and working together to come up with solutions to help meet families' needs and improve outcomes. This happens informally through for example: ongoing discussions between practitioners and formally through internal team meetings. Practitioners in two of the case study areas reported positively on being based in the same room as their colleagues, since this gives opportunities on a daily basis to share experiences in providing support and to gain input to help with the support they are providing to families.
- 5.18 The strong team ethos creates willingness across practitioners to help each other where they can. Practitioners reported that, particularly for families with complex needs or chaotic lifestyles, it is important that momentum is not lost in the absence of practitioners. All practitioners were positive about the willingness and flexibility of their colleagues to provide this ongoing support in their absence and to deliver the support in a way that they would.

Example: Intensive Family Support Service (Case Study E)

The team use each other's skills and experience to move families forward, share ideas and resolve difficulties or issues. *"You can often get ground down with some of the families we work with. You need your colleagues for that support and fresh eyes, you need input from others"* (Key Worker). This approach also helps provide consistent support to parents. For example, one Key Worker commented that if she was on annual leave, she knew that her colleagues would ensure that any issues that arose with her caseload were addressed, but also that her families would be supported in the same way as she supported them. This was felt to be important in ensuring that families received a consistent approach from all practitioners, thereby helping establish and maintain a positive relationship.

The mix of skills and experience across the team were felt to be particularly helpful in developing team support and ensuring that these attributes could be best used to meet the needs of the families. This was a view reflected by the Action for Children manager who felt that they had developed a culture within the service of shared responsibility focused on sharing ideas and airing frustrations. *"We have a team approach, staff learn from each other and new staff come in and feed off that"*. (Manager)

More formal structures such as team meetings and team development days also provided the opportunity for building a sense of shared responsibility and openness within the project team.

Creating a Welcoming Environment

- 5.19 Creating a welcoming environment where parents feel at ease helps support engagement and encourages the development of positive practitioner–parent relationships. Practitioners felt that it is important that they are able to create a positive and welcoming service atmosphere to help parents feel comfortable and minimise any barriers to access.
- 5.20 Action for Children practitioners strive to ensure that services are not viewed as being cliquey and are welcoming to service users. Practitioners felt that, particularly for group–based services, it is important that they help to introduce new service users to existing groups. One Children's Centre involved in the case study research identified that they regularly mixed membership up of group–based provision to ease access for new parents joining.

Example: Early Intervention Service (Case Study A)

The administrator felt she:

- always remained polite, professional and helpful when speaking with parents;
- listened to what the parents say – *“if they want to talk, let them”*;
- did not judge parents, showing understanding and that they are listening;
- ensured that if a project worker was unavailable, she took a message and if the matter was urgent to ask if they would like to speak to someone else.

Example: A mother phoned wanting to speak to a project worker who was on leave. She did not want to leave a message but said she wanted the project worker to phone her on her return from leave and that it was urgent. The mother sounded upset so the administrator contacted the project manager so that she could phone the mother back. The outcome was that the family’s concerns were addressed sooner than if they had waited for the project worker to return from leave. The parent appreciated this immediate response, which allowed issues to be addressed promptly and made sure that they did not escalate.

Family Level

5.21 The facilitators identified at a family level that support the development of an effective relationship between practitioners and parents are:

- parental willingness to improve or make changes;
- strong assessment processes.

Parental Willingness to Improve or Make Changes

5.22 The willingness of parents to improve or make changes in their lives is felt by practitioners to be an important factor influencing their ability to establish an effective relationship. Practitioners felt that where parents are able to recognise issues, take ownership of making positive changes and be receptive to the support being offered, it is quicker and easier to build a positive relationship.

5.23 Practitioners recognised that for some parents there might be a willingness to want to make changes, but a lack of self-esteem or confidence in how to achieve this. For other parents, having to deal with some issues may be a daunting prospect. Using skills and qualities from the Skills Framework such as openness, respect and praise practitioners viewed their role as supporting and encouraging parents to make positive changes.

Strong Assessment Processes

What does the literature tell us?

Assessment drives the process for identifying the type of support a family is offered. If parents do not feel that the assessment process identifies their real needs and priorities then the parents may feel that the worker does not understand their family – this may prevent engagement with the support workers and services offered.

York Consulting (2010) found that the use of a family assessment tool improved family outcomes by recognising and addressing the inter-related nature of family issues. Broadhurst et al (2010) found that assessment could be too focused on the content of referral, without considering the case history. It suggests that case chronologies or cumulative summary sheets, are accessible at the front of electronic files to aid case analysis and to encourage practitioners to contextualise the presenting issues in a broader child and family history. During initial assessment, they also found that it is critical that where there are a number of agencies involved with a child, each agency clearly understands their role and level of involvement to prevent parental confusion/repetition.

- 5.24 As detailed previously, having in place strong assessment processes at a family level are felt by practitioners to be integral in being able to understand and respond to family needs.
- 5.25 Using comprehensive assessment processes that place children, young people and families at the centre ensures from the outset that the support process is established as a partnership approach. This encourages the active involvement of parents and other family members in identifying solutions to address their own issues. The assessment process provides the opportunity for practitioners to get to know parents. This is invaluable in forming the basis of a strong practitioner–parent relationship.

Example: Early Intervention Service (Case Study A)

By undertaking a thorough assessment of families' needs practitioners felt that they had a good understanding of the issues families faced and how this influenced their engagement with other services.

Practitioners complete an assessment framework, highlighting concerns and needs which other agencies/services working with the family need to be aware of. Practitioners ensure that the parent is informed of any intention they have to communicate information to other professionals in keeping with Action for Children policies and procedures.

The outcome of this was that families trust the practitioner and are able to work with them. They are also aware that if any concerns do arise these will be referred to the appropriate agency.

6 CHALLENGES IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF EFFECTIVE RELATIONSHIPS WITH PARENTS

6.1 The case study research identified a number of challenges in the development of effective relationships between Action for Children practitioners and vulnerable parents. These include:

- meeting organisational requirements;
- effective support of practitioners;
- engagement of other services; and
- family context and circumstances.

6.2 These challenges are discussed in detail below.

Meeting Organisational Requirements

What does the literature tell us?

Social-work focused research has identified key challenges in meeting organisational requirements and the impact this has in the development of effective relationships with families. For example, research by Altman (2008) explored the process of engagement in child welfare services as seen by worker and parents and how engagement is seen to be influenced. The research found that all workers mentioned high caseloads and overwhelming paperwork as being barriers to developing effective relationships with parents.

6.3 Action for Children services felt that achieving an appropriate balance between family contact and meeting organisational requirements is a key challenge. Some practitioners reported that the time required for completing external and internal monitoring systems can be significant. This is particularly pertinent where services have multiple monitoring systems in order to meet the requirements of both Action for Children and funders. There were concerns that too much '*paper work*' reduces the time that practitioners have to undertake direct work with families.

- 6.4 **Practitioners raised concerns about the impact of external targets on outcomes for children, young people and families.** Stakeholders in case study areas recognised there should be a clear focus on exiting families from support when needs have been met and outcomes have been achieved. However, there was a concern that placing too much focus on output targets (e.g. the number of families that a service have worked with) instead of the outcomes achieved can potentially have a negative impact on the relationship that practitioners are able to develop with parents. Action for Children prides itself on working with families for *'as long as it takes'* and practitioners felt being too target driven potentially risks families being exited from support before they are ready.
- 6.5 Action for Children services did recognise that targets and monitoring requirements are a necessary organisational requirement to ensure they are accountable for the support they are providing to families. They felt that, as an organisation Action for Children is moving towards a focus on measuring outcomes, which is felt to be beneficial in addressing this organisational challenge.

Effective Support of Practitioners

What does the literature tell us?

Research by Kellett and Apps (2009) looked at how a range of health, education and family practitioners made their assessments of parenting and parenting support needs. Practitioners interviewed through the research felt that it was important for them to identify and reflect on diversity issues, but often had no formal way (such as supervision, frameworks or tools) to help them make sense of the impact of diversity on parenting and the family and incorporate this into assessments. Practitioners were found to often lack confidence or uncertainty around cultural and ethnicity differences.

- 6.6 Allowing practitioners sufficient time for meaningful reflection within supervision was sometimes felt to be a challenge within available resources. Action for Children services often provide reactive, target-driven services and as such face challenges in providing practitioners with sufficient opportunities within formal supervision to reflect on their practice.

- 6.7 Action for Children managers appreciated that providing meaningful opportunities to engage practitioners in dialogue about their caseloads is critical. Practitioners expressed concerns that not providing sufficient time for self-reflection within supervision could potentially have a detrimental effect on the effectiveness of the support and the relationships they develop with parents. For some practitioners, allowing themselves time for independent reflection (outside of supervision) is one mechanism for avoiding any negative impact on their practice.
- 6.8 The strong team ethos evident across the case study areas is also felt to be a conducive environment for allowing more informal practitioner reflection to take place. Practitioners engage in ongoing case discussions on a daily basis; a mechanism for supporting a focus on self-reflection. Furthermore, regular team meetings were reported to often act as a forum for group-supervision, allowing time for practitioners to come together with their colleagues to openly discuss cases and resolve issues.

Engagement of Other Services

What does the literature tell us?

York Consulting's Family Pathfinders evaluation (2011) identified some key challenges in effectively working in partnership with other services in the delivery of family-focused support. Different thresholds for accessing services were found to lead to difficulties in constructing cross-service packages of support for families. The Pathfinders also faced challenges in developing shared understanding of working practices and requirements across adult and children's services. Some Pathfinders also found that they received a lack of referrals from adult services, despite spending time and resources on raising awareness of the service.

6.9 Practitioners occasionally face challenges in securing the commitment and maintaining the engagement of other agencies. Practitioners commented that they often spent time chasing other agencies to make sure they are meeting their responsibilities for children, young people and families. For example, this may involve chasing other agencies to attend multi-agency meetings or to make sure that they have delivered on actions that they have agreed to take forward (e.g. making referrals for families or providing support when agreed). This is more common in intensive family support services, where prompt and reactive responses from all agencies is essential in ensuring that family needs are addressed and outcomes for children and young people are improved.

6.10 Action for Children practitioners also felt that it is sometimes challenging to encourage other agencies to take action or fulfil their responsibilities for children, young people and families at the pace that they as a service would appreciate. Practitioners reported that they found it frustrating that they had to spend considerable time pursuing other agencies.

“Sometimes there is some degree of resistance that we need to overcome, sometimes there is some negotiation or a lack of urgency” (Action for Children manager)

6.11 A focus on building strong links with other services through formal and informal networking was felt by practitioners to be a key mechanism for helping to secure the engagement of other services.

Family Context and Circumstances

6.12 Stakeholders in case study areas recognised that there are often external factors at a family level that influence their ability to develop good relationships with parents. Parents’ preconceptions or negative experiences of other services; the timing of interventions; and parenting ability are all challenges at a family level that can affect the relationship developed between practitioners and parents.

Parents' Preconceptions or Negative Experiences of Other Services

- 6.13 Practitioners reported that parents' preconceptions or negative experiences of other services often influence the relationship-building process. Families are occasionally reluctant to engage in Action for Children support, either due to previously negative experiences of working with services or concerns about the potential consequences of engaging with the service e.g. child being taken into care. Other parents may hold preconceptions about the support offered by the service and lack confidence, which also may lead to reluctance to engage.
- 6.14 Practitioners recognised that as such there is more groundwork needed with some families to develop a good relationship in order to overcome these preconceptions or negative experiences. Action for Children practitioners whilst challenging parents, do so with a focus on engagement and encouraging parents to recognise themselves where they require support. Action for Children is conscious about the importance of the process of engaging families, ensuring they feel comfortable and confident to engage in support.
- 6.15 Practitioners felt that breaking down parents' service preconceptions takes time. Spending a greater amount of time with parents from the outset of the relationship to make sure they are clear about the support on offer, and its aims helps achieve this. Working in partnership with parents to set goals and targets and agree outcomes whilst displaying openness and respect were all felt to be important in breaking down barriers between practitioners and parents.

Example: Early Intervention Service (Case Study A)

For a family that the service was supporting practitioners tailored their engagement approach to help the parents feel at ease and encourage them to engage with the service. Practitioners took a family out to appointments with services and sat down with the mother in a coffee shop, away from home to discuss how they could help the family and work with them, prior to actually starting work with the family. This pre-groundwork was seen as an essential element of relationship building and helped show the family that the Action for Children services were not like other services that they may have had difficulties with.

Timing of Interventions

- 6.16 Practitioners recognised that for some families the timing of the intervention or support is not always suitable. Families may feel unable to engage in the support being offered if they have too many conflicting priorities in their lives, or do not have a willingness to address the issues at the time they are referred to the service.
- 6.17 Action for Children’s approach to addressing issues around the timing of intervention is varied; influenced by service context and family needs. Practitioners may attempt to address this through working with parents to resolve pertinent issues that may be a barrier to engagement in support or preventing the family addressing more significant needs. For example, providing practical support initially to families (see para 2.31) that offers ‘*quick wins*’ is one mechanism for helping families to engage in support and supports the creation of a positive relationship between practitioners and parents.
- 6.18 In some Action for Children services, there is clearly a much greater pressure on parents to engage in support. For example, although engagement in intensive family support services is voluntary, practitioners felt that many families recognised that if they did not engage with support there is a risk of homelessness or their children being taken into care. As such, practitioners are very clear with parents about the potential consequences of not engaging in support.
- 6.19 For early intervention and preventative services, practitioners may need to use various approaches to attempt to engage parents in support. This involves a persistent approach to encourage parents to see the potential benefits of engaging in support and the outcomes that could be achieved for themselves and their child(ren). However, practitioners also recognise that this may lead to them concluding that the timing of support is not currently appropriate for the family.

Parenting Ability

- 6.20 Practitioners reported that parents who have not received appropriate parenting themselves sometimes have limited knowledge about how to interact with and parent their own children. Parents often have set views on how to parent based on previous parenting experiences.
- 6.21 Access to parenting support programmes and the use of modelling behaviour are also strategies used by Action for Children case study areas to address issues with poor parenting. For example, one Children’s Centre commented that they work with parents to show them positive approaches to parenting their children and then encourage them to adopt these approaches themselves.

ANNEX A
LITERATURE REVIEW SEARCH CRITERIA

Table A.1 : Search Criteria

Parent Vulnerable Marginalised disadvantaged Family/ies Practitioner Relationship Services Outcomes Key worker Effective	Provider Characteristics Skills Experience Staff Early intervention Parenting Intervention Delivery
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ANNEX B
BIBLIOGRAPHY

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