

Research highlights challenges faced by high conflict families

April 1 2014, by Fiona Tyrrell

Common challenges faced by high-conflict families include domestic abuse, poor mental health and addiction according to new research by a Trinity academic. The research was published recently in a new report entitled Policy Recommendations for Policy Makers authored by Dr Stephanie Holt, Director of Teaching and Learning at Trinity's School of Social Work and Social Policy, and Candy Murphy of CMAAdvice.

The research comprised an evaluation of new Child Contact Centre services, which were run on a pilot basis in two locations in north and south Dublin between 2011 and 2013 by One Family and Barnardos. The service offered a range of assessment, contact and [family](#) support services to high-conflict families who were frequently in legal disputes in relation to contact arrangements for their children providing a safe, neutral, child-centered environment for children to spend time with the parent/s they do not live with. Common challenges for families included [domestic abuse](#), [poor mental health](#) and addiction.

According to the evaluation findings, families ranged across socio-economic backgrounds and the services were mainly used constructively by courts. Referrals to the service were from the courts (35%), self-referrals (29%) and the HSE/Social Workers (22%). 40% of families had a HSE Social Worker. Currently children may be court-ordered into unsafe contact/access situations due to inadequate information available to

Speaking about the report Dr Stephanie Holt, commented: "For

approximately 10-30% of separated families, the process by which contact is agreed is problematic and potentially dangerous. Some parents (both perpetrators and victims of domestic violence) may not see that domestic abuse impacts negatively on their ability to parent well or that such abuse may negatively impact their children. The service worked closely with all parties providing a safe place for the voice of the child to be heard and a core focus on the child's best interest. With child-centred therapeutic support even young children were able to articulate what they wanted in terms of contact."

Karen Kiernan, One Family CEO, added: "The courts need access to professionally conducted family assessments in order to make child-centred decisions that will be safe and enforceable. This will save court time and ensure that children do not experience unsafe court-ordered contact visits. Child Contact Centre services offering supervised, supported and handover contact, in conjunction with family supports including counselling, parent mentoring and child therapy, must be part of the ancillary court services contained in the Children & Family Relationships Bill. Effective cross departmental and interagency working is essential involving the Department of Justice and Equality including the Courts Service, the Probation Service, the Legal Aid Board, the Family Mediation Service and COSC; and the Department of Children and Youth Affairs including the Child and Family Agency which now has responsibility for child protection and welfare."

Key Findings

- Referrals to the service were from the courts (35%), self-referrals (29%) and the HSE/Social Workers (22%).
- 40% of families had a HSE Social Worker.
- The average age of parents was 33 years old and 79% of parents were unmarried.
- There was an average of two children per family and 66% of the

children were aged 8 or younger.

- 72% of families had been in or were in court proceedings with 58% of families having Access Orders in place.
- 77% of children had either never lived with their non-resident parent or not lived with them for over a year.
- At the time of the referral, 61% of children had no contact with their non-resident parent.
- 59% of families in the service were assessed as having a current risk of child abuse and 50% of families had a current risk of domestic violence.
- 23 Child Protection Notifications were sent by the service to the HSE in respect of 38 children.
- The service offered [children](#) and parents 455 contact opportunities of which 333 (73%) were taken up.
- The service offered a total of 502 counselling and parent-mentoring sessions of which 387 (77%) were taken up.

Provided by Trinity College Dublin

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