

# Study explores emotional intelligence and stress in social work

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Realistic workloads and ongoing emotional support are essential if social workers are to manage stress and perform their job effectively, according to new research by the University of East Anglia.

The study by the Centre for Research on Children and Families (CRCF) examined the relationship between [emotional intelligence](#) - the ability to identify and manage emotions in oneself and others - stress, burnout and social work practice. It also assessed whether emotional intelligence [training](#) for social workers would reduce their burnout rates over time.

It is known that the rate of work related stress and burnout among social workers is high compared to similar professions. This contributes to high vacancy rates, particularly in the areas of child care, young people and families, which has consequences for colleagues and those the service is trying to help.

Emotional intelligence training is offered by some local authorities but there is little consistent evidence to show the benefits of such interventions on practice. This UEA study involved 209 child and family social workers across eight local authorities in England.

The researchers found that the training received overwhelmingly positive feedback from participants, but it did not show any statistically significant effect on stress and burnout after the training. One possible reason for little effect of training on stress and burnout is that few participants used the training tools in practice. The researchers suggest

that embedding training and follow-ups into supervision systems is likely to improve the transfer of training into practice.

Key organisational predictors of stress and burnout were: work demands, resource provision, training provision, leader and peer support. The key psychological predictor of stress and burnout was emotional intelligence.

The researchers recommend that if social workers are to be most effective, it is essential that they have realistic workloads and good administrative support, and that the demands for more recording and regulation should come with provision of sufficient resources.

The findings are presented in a report launched today at CRCF's annual conference in London. Entitled 'Emotional intelligence, and burnout in child and family social work: implications for policy and practice', it makes recommendations for policymakers, local authorities and social workers about how to manage stress and burnout in the profession. The three-year project was funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC).

Lead author Dr Laura Biggart, a lecturer in social science research and psychology, said social workers are meant to get reflective supervision - talking with others about their own experiences to improve the way they work - but this often gets squeezed out by other demands.

"The study confirmed that social work is an emotionally demanding profession, suggesting that particular attention should be given by social work employers to the workplace environment and social worker support," said Dr Biggart. "Workload is an issue for all authorities and the emotional demands of this type of work need to be taken into account. Finding ways to reduce stress at work would have benefits for employees, employers and service users.

"Social workers have a positive role to play in the lives of children from troubled and abusive backgrounds. Many young people themselves speak positively about the help they have received from their social workers. In order to sustain social workers in post and make the most of the economic investment made in them through training and post-qualifying experience, policy makers need to take account of the emotional demands of this profession, alongside workload issues."

The report's key recommendations include:

- Acknowledging the emotional demands in social work and strategies for managing these should be provided within qualifying social work training and continuing professional development.
- Senior managers should ensure there are clear systems to hear the views of social workers about workload issues and to provide feedback as to what action has been taken to address such issues.
- Senior managers need to establish regular systems to monitor stress in their workplace and involve their team managers and social workers in finding solutions to workload issues and improving the workplace environment.
- Team managers should ensure that social workers have the opportunity for reflective supervision.
- Team members should be encouraged to jointly problem solve on complex issues/cases.
- For social workers, a range of effective coping strategies are outlined.

Dr Biggart said: "The role of child and family social workers involves witnessing trauma and neglect and the consequences of these on vulnerable children and families. They are increasingly working in settings where resources are often restricted and work in frequently changing organisational structures with consequent changes in team

membership.

"Given the emotional demands of the social work role, enhancing emotional intelligence resources could be one way of providing social workers with the skills required to cope with these various, and potentially stressful, issues."

## **The research project**

The study participants were split into two groups and completed online questionnaires at two month intervals over 12 months (a randomised control trial). They were asked about their social work experience, reported psychological and physiological stress and burnout, work demands, stressful life events and emotional intelligence. Fifty-three of them were also interviewed about coping strategies. They all attended a two day emotional intelligence training session, with one group receiving the training first and the second having it towards the end of the study period.

As well as evaluating the effect of emotional intelligence training, the study aimed to capture key characteristics of social work practice by developing an online self-report tool to help social workers reflect on their practice. This has been informed by survey responses from 407 [social workers](#) at 23 local authorities in England. Once complete the tool will be introduced into social work and practice educator training.

Provided by University of East Anglia

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