Effective work with hard to reach families

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Overview

Families can be very hard to help, they may avoid us, dismiss us or confront us to reject what we are trying to offer or do. For some families, and in some agencies, parents who do not want our help can be passed over - our efforts can easily be directed to parents who are more ready and able to work with us. For other families, and in other agencies, this approach is not possible. The family will have passed a threshold of need or generated a level of concern significant enough to require the state to take a view as to the welfare of children or vulnerable adults.

Just because a family is known to agencies does not make them more 'easy to reach'. For some families, often those where parents are living with mental health issues or learning difficulties, or where there is domestic abuse, the opposite is the case. The family boundary can become even more actively policed by the adult most concerned with keeping agencies away.

Your understanding of family systems will help you here to think about where to focus your help best for maximum effect, use tools like geneograms and ecomaps to help you understand what is going on and how to make changes.

There is a growing list of the 'hard to help' or 'hard to reach' and a growing list of different labels for them, created often with the best of intentions and in a desire to avoid any blame attaching to the families themselves. What all the terms add up to really is that there are families in need of help who are not receiving any or not the right help at the right time.

There is often a sense of anxiety about 'hard to reach' families, we are concerned that they may have multiple and complex problems we do not know about. We may worry that when they finally do arrive to seek our help they will overwhelm us, equally we worry that we will have missed the opportunity to intervene early to get a good outcome. The chances are, of course, that when these families arrive at your door you will be able to help them very well indeed, but unknown and unquantifiable need is always sensibly bound to provoke some anxiety.

In your own agency 'hard to reach' families may include young fathers, travelling families, families where children act as carers, BME families and families living with domestic abuse and mental health problems. These, and others, are groups which are generally under-represented in service monitoring data despite the fact that they feature on your local census of other demographic analysis.

This approach is honourable, when we know which families in our communities are not using the services we offer we can think about why that might be and how it could be changed. The research on under-represented families can help us somewhat and the new ventures into specific social marketing for this group of families. Often it requires us to take what we do **to** families rather than wait for them to come, build an excellent word of mouth reputation and work with key individuals and community groups.

This short guide will show you some of the approaches that have been taken in the UK, and elsewhere, that seem to produce a good effect and some of the very practical work we can do, including measuring our effect (see Section 5).

What this guide cannot do, given its size and general scope, is to offer you specific guidance on an individual family that is troubling you; that is something to take to your individual or group

supervision, to research further and to discuss with colleagues.

Section 1: Understanding imperatives: why do you want or need to work with hard to reach families? What is making them hard to reach?

Marginalised families

Some of the families we want and need to work with are the 'invisible', the groups identified above who are under-represented in our service user profiling, and whom we are concerned about. We usually believe that their lives might be easier and children might achieve more if we could help them and that future, more entrenched difficulties could be avoided. This group is often described as 'marginalised' and we have professional concerns that they are offered less than their fair share of resources given their absence and distance. Some of the families in this group are living with many challenges in their lives, and it may be the identification of their needs by an alert housing officer, teacher or health professional that helps parents accept the need for help.

These are the families who can be engaged using friendship circles, trusted professionals as 'brokers' and when we and our colleagues are able to respond positively to the smallest signal that help would be received if it were given in the way the family can use it and at a place and time of their choice.

Service-resistant or troubled families

The approach we may take with the marginalised families needs to be different from the one we adopt with families whom we know about and are concerned about but who really want to have nothing to do with us at all. These families are the ones that "keep me awake at night" (Nala, Family Support Worker).

These families may use their chaos or violence and the threat of violence to keep the world, including ourselves, at bay. Barrett (2008) suggested that families like these were better called 'Service-Resistant', and in this group she included long-term multi-problem families, criminally active families, domestic violence/abuse perpetrators, anti-social families, substance abusing parents and 'fringe-dwelling' families. She suggests that they are characterised by their unwillingness to engage, their high degree of suspicion, a general lack of use of other opportunities and a tendency to minimise the problems others think they face.

Interestingly, Barrett thought that service resistant families were sometimes over-targeted to very little effect, all the resources they absorb are then not available to other families who would use them far better.

What **does** seem to work well for many chronically troubled families is a well-trained, well-supervised worker who is clear about the reasons for engaging with a family, understand both the power they have to use from their agency, or the power a professionals' network will entitle them to use (statutory orders from ASB and Housing sanctions legislation, school attendance, supervision or care proceedings from child care law, together with treatment and other compliance orders).

What also helped workers be more effective in their work with families was a clear plan setting out what the work would look like, who would do what and how, what changes needed to be made and by when, the rewards for positive change and the consequences or sanctions for either no change or worsening of behaviours, for example. Families may not have liked the process of contract setting and planning but reported that the clarity about expectations helped them more than previously offered hints and hopes.

To be effective in this work with challenging families whose needs are complex and ever-changing, workers need to be personally resilient, well supported and knowledgeable, there are many things we could do, for and with families, we need to be confident we are choosing the best interventions, supported by good research.

That takes time, more than most of us usually give to reading and thinking. The challenge back is that we need to read and reflect if we are to be as good as we would like to be at our job of helping families change. For a short guide to working with challenging families download *How to help families in trouble* (www.familyandparenting.org/All-Our-Publications/For-Practitioners/How+to+Help+Families+in+Trouble).

Much of the best evidence and good practical suggestions can be found in the recent report from the Troubled Families Team in the DCLG, pp35-36 has the references (https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/working-with-troubled-families-a-guide-to-evidence-and-good-practice).

Whilst what we can do to work effectively with hard to reach families is clearly set out in the research literature actually doing it is quite another thing. As with all difficult and complex areas of practice it is imperative to talk feelings, plans and actions through fully in supervision. It also matters a good deal that we reflect always on what it must be like being a child or vulnerable adult in a family we are concerned about. It may tell us that their place there should not continue. We must always 'try that thought on'.

Section 2: Forming relationships, what families want from workers, maintaining contact, what to keep in mind and tools to use

What is fundamental to all our work with families, supported by research time and time again, is the worker's capacity to make warm, authentic relationships with those we are seeking to help. It is through this relationship and this alone that change is made. (e.g.,Horvath, 1991; Marziali & Alexander, 1991). This can seem daunting but when we reflect on it we can see that it is true of our own lives too, the relationships we have had with parents, our siblings, friends and teacher have all affected us, some were good healthy relationships and others not, but each will have changed us in some way.

We must be professional, well trained and confident about what we do but nothing can replace the need for us to be able to reach out and make a human connection with family members, even those, particularly those, who are angry, abusive and desperately distressed. We do not condone bad behaviours in others but we cannot be diverted from our purpose by it.

How we make contact and maintain it is critical for many families, not only the hard to reach and very marginalised. When we are working with families who are very anxious about being judged, have been let down in the past or simply fearful then our communication needs to be all the more carefully planned if we are not to create the anxiety that makes some families retreat even further.

Families report confidence in workers who do not use written communications but phone or, for some families, visit the family home, particularly if the issues they need to talk about are complicated or painful. Equally, workers whom families hold in high regard are straight talking but not cruel, they check back to see that what they have said has been understood by those who need most to understand, "tell me what I've just told you about Tina being sent home from school today" and workers do the same with messages the family are giving them, "let me make sure I have this straight in my mind, the dog is at the vets because…." (Dept. of Health 1995).
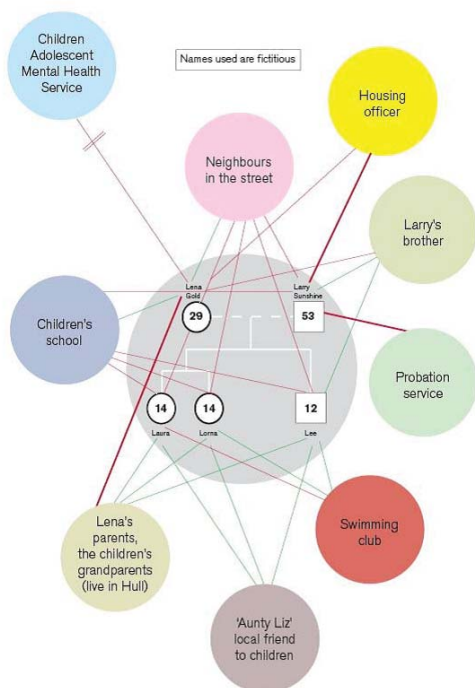
It helps families hugely if we workers know why we are standing at their door and that we know what questions we need answers to or areas we need to think together and plan together on. We cannot afford to waste our time and we should be vigilant in not expecting families to waste theirs. Equally, and to complicate matters, we need to be flexible enough to give a family more time if they need it, some conversations we need to have with hard to reach families can take a very long time indeed and may need to be planned over several meetings.

The final area that effective workers are good at is seeing who they need to see. It is easy to accept that we will work with whomsoever arrives at the office or is at home when we visit. This is not really good enough in terms of our plan of work. We need to work with the resourceful and helpful people in families who can act as ambassadors for our ideas and plans, this means that change is located inside the family and does not rely on our enduring involvement.

It can mean changing the way we work and the way we think about the family in front of us, a critical question to ask ourselves is, "who am I NOT seeing?". Given that change is hard and that family systems will often be working against you in subtle and unsubtle ways we need to muster all the resources the family have to undertake the work together.

This is when drawing tools like family trees and

ecomaps come into their own, along with story boards, photographs and Talking Picture tools, (for family trees and ecomaps like the one here download http://www.familyandparenting.org/All-Our-Publications/For-Practitioners/How+to+Help+Families+in+Trouble+Briefing+Sheet) and excellent ideas on working creatively with whole children and families see *Listening to children's wishes and feelings – Handbook*, Corrigan & Moore)

Supervision helps us stay helpful to the family, it can keep us from getting too close and becoming a friend or too remote and with a minimal impact. Distance in family work really matters.

Measuring helps, if you have worked with the family for a while and you used a measuring tool, perhaps the Goodman Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (http://www.sdqinfo.org/) or others at the start of your work it may be worth your while seeing how things if changed, if at all. A good tool, like the Goodman, will tell you something interesting about what family are struggling with and they can feel very rewarded by progress they have made. You can be helped by measuring too, it may confirm that work is not helping this particular family change and you will need to try another approach, or that surprisingly, despite your worries and concerns change **is** being achieved, perhaps in small steps that you have not had time to notice.

When we are really stuck there are several things we can do. We can ask for help from a colleague, perhaps they can come with you to visit the family and observe your work, they may pick up on something you are missing. Equally importantly, we can ask the family we are working with to help us understand why things are complex or difficult to change.

We can also start looking for answers or clues in places we have not looked before – have we thought about and asked questions about the parents' relationships, whether they live together or apart? Most workers do not ask about this relationship as we may think it is private or too complicated to work with and yet for many hard to reach, hard to help and very troubled families it is the critical relationship, either deeply problematic or a real resource. Think and read the research on this for a prompt.

Towards the end of your work with those families who have been really helped by you to make big changes you might notice a sudden relapse as work together draws to a planned close. Plainly that is not how it is supposed to be but we forget the human impulse to hold on to things we value. Sometime families who have struggled and fought all the way find it hard to let go of the worker who has helped them make such changes.

What helps here, as it does in most situations,

Section 3: What to do when your approach isn't working and how we can safeguard success

Some families are very hard to help indeed and you may easily find yourself asking, "Why isn't this it working?". You may be adopting an approach that has worked well before and has a good research pedigree but the family problems that confronted you at the start of your work remain or have become more entrenched.

It may also be that the family you have worked with for a few months and for with whom you have made good progress seem to disappear, or key family members are always 'out', leaving you unable to proceed as you had planned with the family.

These are messages of course and we need to have a think with colleagues and our supervisor as to what we can do differently, because the onus really does rest with us to be the engine of change until families are ready and able to motor on without us.

is to notice and have a wonder with the family, "I wonder if it is hard to think of going on by yourselves that you are showing me you need me? You really don't need to do that because I know that you will do really well and I will be here to help if you need me badly". The family may well deny it – and it may not be true – but it often helps as it shows how the ending of work is important to us, as workers too.

Section 4: Understanding and using strengths

We should always try to leave every family we work with more capable of managing their day to day difficulties, with a greater sense of what they are good at and an appreciation of the areas or tasks that are tricky for them and where they need more help.

For some families this is and always will be a real challenge, ironically some research in Canada on hard to reach families and social marketing found that some hard to reach families were over-confident as to their abilities to manage, they were hard to help because they did not feel they needed any (http://www.socialmarketingquarterly. com/reaching-hard-reach-hope-and-help). When they did find help that was acceptable it produced a reduction in confidence and an increase in seeking and accepting help from social marketing web resources. This reduction in confidence was necessary to allow the help 'in' and we can find similar results when we work with families here in the UK. It is clear that in both countries parents living in socially and economically underprivileged conditions do not respond well to more risk communication, "children who don't have someone read to them for at least 15 minutes a day are at risk of poorer educational outcomes", but they will respond positively to opportunities to be in control of some aspects of their lives.

One way to help families have a strengths conversation is to use a tool like the American Family Strengths Inventory, it has rather a US feel but nonetheless a good way to help families have conversations about who they are and what they want to be, to build on the hope and help message (http://www.ianrpubs.unl.edu/live/g1881/build/ g1881.pdf). It has a series of question areas and you need not consider them all but the Managing

Stress and Crisis Effectively and Global Measure of Family Strengths is very useful. For example, in the last section, the family is asked to consider a yes/no response to four questions, 1) We love one another 2) Life in our family is satisfying to us 3) We are happy as a family 4) All things considered we are a strong family.

These are important questions, ones that nearly every family, troubled, hard to help, marginalised or not would like to answer yes to. With our careful work and a lot of determination we can help the families we work with have more yeses than noes, and that should make us proud.

Section 5: References and further reading to help you more

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