

Working with Families

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Chapter objectives

- To explore what is meant by ‘family’ within a diverse society and why family is important for children.
- To consider the implications of what it means for children when they do not have an identifiable ‘family’.
- To discuss early years policy initiatives in relation to children and their families.
- To acknowledge the relationship between the statutory and the private, voluntary and independent sectors in work with families

The family has a significant place in the lives of children. Enhancing family life and the role of parents in children’s lives is an important aspect of British social policy. However, in order to work effectively with young children and their families, early years practitioners need to appreciate what what is meant by ‘family’ within a diverse society and why family is important for children. They will also find it helpful to consider how they can work with and support families within legal and policy parameters, and the implications of what it means for children when they do not have an identifiable ‘family’. This chapter opens by exploring the implications of what it means for children whose understanding of family is limited. This is illustrated by the following example of Lily and Lee.

Case Study: Lily and Lee

A play therapist had started working with Lily aged 6 and her brother, Lee aged 5. Three days earlier, they had been taken into care and placed with foster carers. The two children were asked by the therapist to draw their family. Lily drew a line of figures. When asked who they were,

Lily indicated: Lee, her 'gran', a neighbour, a new teacher, a neighbour's dog, her mother and a worker at a women's refuge. Lee drew his new foster family.

As a child, Lily and Lee's own mother had had no example of secure family life and it was therefore understandable that she was unable to create one for her children. They, in their short lives prior to coming into care, and under the *ad hoc* arrangements made by their mother, had experienced over 20 different 'homes' and a vast array of casual carers.

Discussion points

- How far do you feel concern for Lily and Lee and if you feel concern, why do you do so.
- If you feel any concern for the children, do you feel more for Lily or Lee, or the same amount of concern for both?

Reflection

This case study of Lily and Lee shows that for some children, 'family' is a remote or confusing concept. It also suggests how important it is for children to grow up within some form of recognizable family. Researchers such as Rutter (1981) and Clarke and Clarke (2000) have demonstrated that, while children are not totally dependent on a single mother figure, they do need to be able to form attachments to a consistent group of carers in order to thrive (Schoore and Schoore, 2008). The family, alongside reliable alternative carers such as childminders or key nursery staff, form the secure base from which children can start to explore the wider world.

Despite the clear indications that in order to develop satisfactorily, children need an identifiable, dependable family in the early years, the form it takes can vary. Diverse cultural traditions or socio-economic and geographical factors can mean that families may live as isolated nuclear ones or as large extended families with several generations sharing the same accommodation. Some children have reconstituted families following the death or divorce of a parent and subsequent remarriage or new partnership. Others are in care and have substitute families. Those from traveller or armed services families may well experience a number of

different locations or homes but most have a established, core family. It is through the experience of a 'stable' family life that the family members are able to grow, flourish and meet their full potential.

An understanding and framework of how human needs can be satisfied is provided by the theorists, Maslow (1970) and Alderfer (1972). Their theories have been modified and adapted to ensure their relevance to children's development by researchers such as Thompson et al. (2001) and Doyle and Timms (2013). Basically, whatever its nature, as long as a family meets their physical requirements and provides love, care, security, safety and a sense of belonging, children will develop well and reach their potential.

Because of the importance of family, most of the world religions and many cultural traditions provide guidelines on how family life and relationships should be conducted; in some states these are adopted or ratified by national governments. In societies such as the UK, there is a wide variety of religions and cultures and a significant proportion of the population espouses no religion, therefore the government, rather than any church or religious authority, intervenes in order to promote optimum family lives for children. The following section looks more closely at the diverse experiences of family life for young children. This chapter will then discuss some of the UK government initiatives. Finally, it will address the relationships between families and those who work with young children and provide services for them.

FAMILY LIFE

Children's experience of family life in the twenty-first century is one of diversity. There have been many changes to family structure, views about marriage have altered and the composition of society reflects differences of culture, ethnicity and religion (Cleaver, 2006; Gittins, 1993; Lancey, 2013). More recently, there have also been changes in migration patterns to the UK, bringing with them new challenges as children accessing early years services have either had to adapt to a multitude of new experiences or they are the first of their family to be born in their parents' newly-adopted country (Crawley, 2006).

This changing demography heightens the importance, for those working with children, of

reflection on what is meant by family life and early childhood. The following activity aims to assist in reflections about changes in families and the diversity of family structures.

Activity 1 – The Nature of Family

Think about a family that you have known for many years:

- What is the structure of the family (e.g. do the children have one mother and one father or do they have several mother or father figures or only one parent. Is the extended family – aunts, uncles, grandparents – in close contact or rarely involved)?
- How do you think that family's life has changed over the generations?
- What do you think about the changes?
- How do you think other people would answer these questions?

While the above activity highlights the diversity in families, the next activity examines children's situations in families. The experience of living in a family will vary from child to child. An eldest sibling may even have a different extended family. A grandparent may be alive during the lives of the older children but have died before the birth of a younger one. Some children have a different set of relatives compared to their siblings, for example half-siblings will only share one set of grandparents.

Activity 2 – The place of children in families

Think about what being a child in a family means. Focus on one young child, either from the family you thought of in Activity 1 or another child known to you.

- Is he or she an only child?

- If not, how many brothers and sisters does the child have? Are they ‘full’ siblings or are they step, adoptive, foster or half-siblings?
- What position in the family is your chosen child – youngest, middle or oldest?
- How many parent figures does the child have?
- Are the key parent figures birth parents, or are they step, adoptive or foster carers? Or is there some other guardianship arrangement in place?
- Are the key parents married? Are they in a civil partnership?
- Have they divorced? If divorced, have they remarried?
- What are the position and key roles of the mother figure/s in the household?
- What are the position and key roles of the father figure/s in the household?
- What roles do grandparents, aunts and uncles or other relatives play in the child’s life?

Now having thought about the various dynamics and relationships experienced by the child, try to draw a ‘family tree’ for your chosen child. Is it straightforward and easy to draw or is it very complicated with a number of criss-crossing lines?

Constructed concepts of children and family

These activities highlight that while we all share the fact that we have been a child and experienced ‘childhood’, our experience of being a child is unique, and so is our experience and understanding of being parented and what family life entails. It is an experience whose nature is shaped by how a society socially constructs ‘childhood’ as the following discussion will illustrate.

The way that childhood is constructed is fluid and can be different in different cultures

and has also changed over time within cultures (Finn et al, 2010; Hendrick, 1997). In some societies, 'childhood' is a limited concept (see Chapter 1). Graham (2011), for example, explains that the arguments of Aries (1962) that in Medieval Europe children were simply seen as small adults raises 'questions about the historical, social and culturally specific nature of childhood shaped by shifting configurations of family and educational institutions'. In some belief systems, young children are seen as innocents living in bliss until knowledge of the real world with all its damage and distress intrudes (Ennew, 1986). In contrast, other societies see children as potential soldiers or 'situated as consumers within a global economy' (Finn et al, 2010: 249). There are cultures which view children as objects belonging to their parents whereas other cultures reject this, as exemplified by the words of the Arab philosopher, Kahlil Gibran (1923: 81) who wrote:

Your children are not your children.

They are the sons and daughters of Life's longing for itself.

They come through you but not from you,

And though they are with you yet they belong not to you.

In modern times, there have been moves towards the concept that children are individuals with rights to voice their views, to participation and to be protected. This idea is enshrined in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. On 20 November 1989, the governments, including the UK, represented at the General Assembly agreed to adopt the convention into international law. It came into force in September 1990. A further consequence of this is that governments signing up to the UNCRC have introduced policies to provide appropriate services for children. The preamble to the articles in the Convention (UNESCO, 1989: 1) states:

Convinced that the family, as the fundamental group of society and the natural environment for the growth and well-being of all its members and particularly children, should be afforded the necessary protection and assistance so that it can fully assume its responsibilities within the community, recognizing that the child, for the full and harmonious development of his or her personality,

should grow up in a family environment, in an atmosphere of happiness, love and understanding.

Within early years settings, recognizing and valuing the importance and uniqueness of family life will help early years workers to work with parents, carers and other family members to support the child in the transition into education, maximize their opportunities within it and form a solid foundation to assist them with the next stage of their education.

In 2012, in the UK, there were 13.3 million dependent children (Office for National Statistics, 2012a) and since 1971, the number of children living in lone families has tripled. In 2006, 24 per cent of children were living in lone parent families and the number of households rose by 30 per cent since 1971 (Office of National Statistics, 2008a). This had increased further by 2012 with nearly two million lone families, 92% comprised of mothers and their children. There are also a diminishing number of marriages in England and Wales with 241,100 recorded in 2010 (Office for National Statistics, 2012b) compared to 480,285 in 1972 (Office for National Statistics, 2008b). Furthermore, it is now estimated that 42% of marriages end in divorce (Office for National Statistics, 2012c). However, it is important to note here that divorce does not always have to be a negative event (Steel et al., 2012).

The above statistics demonstrate that the way in which families live is constantly changing. a situation which impacts on the experience of being a child. For example, for some children the experience of family life is living with one parent during the week and another at weekends. An increasing number of children live in reconstituted families while others, as the case example of Lily and Lee at the start of this chapter illustrates, do not consistently live in families with their birth parents.

Turning now to children, like Lily and Lee, with substitute carers, on 31 March 2012 there were 67,050 children looked-after by local authorities in England, an increase of 13 per cent compared to the number in 2008 (Department of Education, 2012). A further 5,726 children were looked-after in Wales, an increase of 24% since 2007 (Welsh Government, 2012). In July 2011 there were 16,171 looked-after children in Scotland (Scottish Government, 2012) and 1,838 in Northern Ireland (DHSSPS, 2012). These 'looked after' children will live

predominantly with foster carers, though some will be placed with extended family members usually in an arrangement called Kinship Care. Some looked-after children will be adopted and a small number of young people are resident in institutions.

Children living away from their families of origin may have experienced a variety of different types of family life. Some might also have been deemed 'in need' under the terms of the Children Act 1989 (DoH, 1989) or have been subject to a care order. For them, like Lily and Lee, their early lives might well comprise frequent moves between their primary caretaker and foster placements; they thus experience repeated separation, loss and the need to develop multiple new attachments. Fawcett et al. (2004) note that, proportionally, more children with disabilities are in care, compared to those without. They may face additional barriers to satisfactory alternative care. For example, Fawcett et al. (2004:125) point out that those children 'regarded as having communication difficulties were found to be excluded from participating in discussions about their needs'.

The ecological model of parenting

The previous section has provided an introduction to concepts of 'family' and 'children', the diversity of family structures and changing trends in family life. One model that supports understanding of the parenting task in this context is an ecological model of parenting O'Sullivan (2012:111). He draws on the work of Belsky (1984) to suggest how the parent-child relationships can be understood in an ecological context. There are three domains which need to be explored: the parent, how they have developed and their 'psychological resources'; the child and their characteristics; and finally 'the contextual sources of stress and support'. This last domain includes such things as: who undertakes the parenting tasks; social support; external agencies such as early years settings; and the impact of parents' employment. To illustrate this further, the cases of Sam and Alexander below afford an opportunity to reflect on how children's early life experiences may impact on their capacity for learning and growth, the role of the early years workers in the lives of young children and how an appreciation of the ecological model of parenting can enhance practice.

Case Study: Sam

Sam is four years old and has just started school. His parents are separated and he spends the weekdays with his mother, who presents as rather anxious, and works part time at the local supermarket. Her parents live in a neighbouring town, her father is disabled and they are unable to offer support. Sam spends weekends with his father, a long distance lorry driver, who collects him from the After-school Club at school on Friday night and brings him to the Breakfast Club at school on Monday morning, with his weekend bag. After school, Sam stays at the After-school Club until he is collected by his mother at 5pm. In class, Sam is withdrawn and often appears tired. He is having difficulty making friendships and is prone to angry outbursts.

Discussion Point

- What do you think the role of an early years practitioner could be in this situation?
- How does the ecological model of parenting support further understanding of the parent–child relationships?

Sam has just started school and has a very long day which may make him tired. He also may or may not find it difficult living in two separate homes. His experiences are impacting on how he is settling into school and making relationships with his peers. His frustration appears to be making him angry and all these circumstances will influence his receptiveness to learning. For the early years practitioner, supporting Sam is really, as is good communication with the practitioners running the Breakfast and After-school Clubs. They also need to talk to Sam's parents about how their son is presenting in the setting. The ecological model of parenting helps those working with the family understand the parenting style and the context in which the family functions.

Case Study: Alexander

Alexander is four years old and has just started in nursery school, his fifth early years setting. He will only be in the nursery for one term as he is due to move into a primary school reception class. He is the subject of a care order and is living in a foster placement. He has been with his current carers since he was three years old and an adoptive home is being sought for him.

Alexander and his mother have been known to social services since his birth. At the age of 16 weeks, he spent his first period in the care of the local authority; he returned to live with his mother when he was 19 weeks old but went back into care two weeks later. Unfortunately, he could not go to the same foster placement so he was placed with new foster carers. He stayed there for a month and then returned to live with his mother. He remained living with her for the next year, but spent regular periods in respite care because of her mental health difficulties.

At the age of 18 months, he spent a prolonged period in care with another new set of foster carers. He remained there until he was two years old, when he returned to live with his mother. Respite care was provided again but with different carers. At the age of three, he returned to the care of the local authority, was placed with yet another new foster carer and a care order was granted. He is currently awaiting matching with an adoptive family.

Discussion Point

- What do you think the impact of Alexander's life experiences will have on his transition into a school setting?
- What are the possible implications of his early experiences and his later life outcomes?
- How does the ecological model of parenting support further understanding of the range of relationships Alexander has to negotiate?

There is now considerable evidence that early experiences of abuse and/or a troubled family life can lead to a turbulent adolescence, including drug and alcohol abuse and challenges in adulthood (Egeland et al., 2002; Allen, 2011). Alexander's early years are marked by frequent moves from his mother to foster and respite care. By the age of four, he has had seven different people

responsible for his care and has lived in six different homes. He has also been in five different early years settings. His mother has had mental health difficulties which would have impacted on her capacity to parent Alexander. His experiences could have led to attachment difficulties because of the number of primary carers he has experienced. The continual changes would have had an impact on his well-being and made him insecure. It is clear that Alexander has not been safe and his capacity for enjoyment and achieving has been compromised. It is important that his transition into the reception class setting is handled sensitively and that he is fully supported, especially as he is likely to move again when an adoptive placement is found for him. It would also be beneficial if all his pictures, photographs and observations were kept to support his understanding of his life story. Early years practitioners need to ensure that they are working as part of the multi-professional team around Alexander to provide excellent levels of communication to support improved life chances. They need to reflect on the support he receives in the setting and ensure that planning gives him opportunities for high quality experiences, consistency of a key worker and opportunities to develop resilience.

RESEARCH IN CONTEXT

Hogg, R., Ritchie, D., de Kok, B., Wood, C. and Huby, G. (2013) Parenting support for families with young children – a public health, user-focused study undertaken in a semi-rural area of Scotland. *Journal of Clinical Nursing*, 22, 1140–1150.

While social care and education are essential provisions in the early years, the health of growing children is also important and individual parents may not always have sufficient knowledge to maximise their children's health or to overcome health-related problems. The paper by Hogg et al (2013) explains that more recently the one-to-one support for families with young children has moved from a universal service in the UK to one targeted towards vulnerable children and families or ones with specific health needs. They therefore set up a research project to explore the general health support needs of families with young children and how these might be met through community-based approaches.

The location of the research was a semi-rural part of Scotland and included an area of deprivation. The participants were 11 mothers and one father who volunteered to take part in focus groups. Three of the mothers were in their teenage years and all were white with English as their first language. A further set of focus groups were held with 17 professionals working with families with young children from various disciplines covering health, education and social care.

The main theme emerging from the parents' groups was that while having children was rewarding there were a number of challenges especially when they had more than one child. If their extended family was not nearby they experienced isolation. The teenage parents had the added burden of a sense that they were being judged negatively. Breast-feeding emerged as a substantial issue with the feelings that while there were strong messages that they should be breastfeeding but insufficient support and advice available.

There was a consensus that help and advice from other parents was particularly helpful although this could be usefully complemented by information about local resources and group-based interventions from professionals. The teenaged parents however sometimes felt they had little in common with older parents so parent groups were less helpful for them.

One important theme emerging from the professionals' groups was the misunderstanding of each other's roles, particularly that of the health visitor. These felt that their caseloads were particularly onerous and they were under pressure to promote breastfeeding. All the professionals acknowledged the importance of multi-agency working although this only worked well where agencies were accommodated close together.

The researchers concluded that peer support among parents with young children is valued but they could also benefit from easy access to professional help and advice particularly in relation to breastfeeding. However, the research showed that neither parents nor other professionals really understood the roles of health visitors. Services for families in the future need to include peer support, easy access to professional support and multi-professional working.

EARLY YEARS POLICY INITIATIVES AND THE FAMILY

The growth of policies in the early years has been profoundly influenced, as Pugh (2005: 31) argued, as a result of the Labour Government (1997-2010) putting ‘services for children and families higher on the national agenda than at any time in living memory’. She continued to argue that the policies transpired for three reasons: improved services for children; to support working mothers; and the need to support parents and carers. Underpinning these policy developments was the drive to reduce poverty and social injustice. As Brooker (2005: 9) argued, measures implemented by the Labour Government (1997-2010) were aimed at:

better provision for young children, along with tax credits and other financial measures, [this] would enable more young parents to study, train and work; as a result they would become higher earners (and hence, higher tax payers) and better parents; in the process they would become more integrated into society and feel more committed to their communities and perhaps also the national interest.

Therefore, from 1997 to 2010 there was considerable government investment across the UK. This was targeted at improving outcomes and services for children, families and the community. There was a strong commitment to the early years, integrated working (see Chapter 11) and support to enable parents to work by providing a full range of services to support them that were easily accessible. Initially, this was through Early Excellence Centres and then Sure Start local programmes (Sure Start, 2008). Following on from these initiatives was the commitment to provide a children’s centre in every community, and push forward the Extended Schools programme (DfES, 2007e) which by 2010 aimed to work with the local authority and other partners to offer access to a range of services and activities which supported and motivated children and young people to achieve their full potential. These services aimed to provide:

- a varied menu of activities, combined with childcare in primary schools
- community access to school facilities

- swift and easy access (referral) to targeted and specialist services
- parenting support.

In England, the Labour Government also put forward their view of proactive support, in *Aiming High for Children: Supporting Families* (DfES, 2007b). They argued for the need for proactive support packages for families. They also contended that children's resilience needed developing and highlighted the requirement to be more responsive to children assessed as 'at risk'.

Alongside these developments was a growing recognition of the importance of the first five years of life to improving later life outcomes (Allen and Duncan Smith, 2008; Allen 2011). However, the change in UK government in 2010 brought with it a change in policy direction. The Conservative-led Coalition Government shifted the focus from poverty and issues of social exclusion towards early intervention and introduced *Families in the Foundation Years* (DfE, 2011). While they reaffirmed the importance of the earliest years and evidence-based practice, there was an increased focus on the families' own responsibility and a more targeted approach. An example here was the special focus on the 120,000 'troubled families' identified by the Coalition Government who were taking up a disproportionate amount of tax payers' money (Department of Communities and Local Government, 2013).

If early years provision specifically is considered nationally in the UK number of three and four year olds receiving early years education tripled between 1970/71 and 2005/6, from 21 per cent to 64 per cent (National Statistics, 2008c). The incoming Coalition Government affirmed the commitment to supporting parents with young children and took forward the former Labour Government's pledge to increase free Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) from 12.5 to 15 hours per week for 3-4 year olds. By 2012 1,264,420 (96%) of three and four year olds were accessing some free early education (DfE, 2012). The Coalition Government decided to extend the age range for free entitlement but rather than taking a universal approach it decided to target the most disadvantaged children. Between 10 and 15 hours of free ECEC was to be provided for 20% of least advantaged two-year-olds by September 2013 with this being increased to 40% by September 2014 (DfE, 2012).

In reviewing the previous case studies of Sam and Alexander, the aim of the policy drivers of

the former Labour Government was to provide better outcomes through the provision of high quality services based (usually) in one place. For example, Alexander's mother would have been able to access the full range of services offered by a children's centre, including support for herself, parenting classes and early years provision for her son. The change of government in 2010 and world recession means that access to a children's centre and their services cannot be guaranteed (see Chapter 11).

Turning to potential outcomes, in relation to Lily, Lee, Alexander and Sam, the services available to them may have enhanced their overall development and their resilience (DfES 2007a; Rutter, 1999). Understanding this is important for those working with children and families because it helps explain the different ways in which children manage their life experiences. Why is it that some adults and children are able to cope with difficult situations and others seem far less able to do so? There is no one answer to this question as it depends on a range of interacting factors and is unique to each individual. Members of one family can all face the same situation but can each handle it very differently. However, early years professionals can support and lead practice in this area. For example, it is evident from Sam's case study that he is having difficulty in coping with the nature of the divided care he is receiving from his parents. Early intervention in this case could help both his parents see the impact of his shared care and support them in looking at alternative arrangements that are more sensitive to his needs as a four-year-old making the transition into school.

HOME-SCHOOL/SETTING PARTNERSHIPS

The rapidly changing landscape of provision in the early years has had an effect upon early years practitioners' relationships with other professionals, the family and the child. The research by Hogg et al (2013) described above demonstrates some of the issues of working with other practitioners and engaging in work with parents. Ideas of partnership are integral to how policies are translated into practice and to the role of the early years practitioner in supporting children and families within a variety of settings. Central to this is the importance of seeing that the family and early years settings have complementary roles in the provision of early childhood

education and care (ECEC), as the following discussion emphasizes.

Vygotsky (1956, 1978) highlighted the importance of the child's 'culture' which is far more than ethnicity; it embraces the child's total physical and emotional environment, history and relationships. 'Enculturation is not something that happens to children; it is something that children do' (Miller, 2002: 373). The implications of this are that if the child's home (or homes) and early years settings do not have shared approaches, are distant from each other or are in conflict, then the child's environment will be confusing and could delay rather than enhance development. Rogoff (1990), in extending Vygotsky's ideas, uses the analogy of an apprenticeship between the child, who is learning to solve problems, and the adult or older child who provides implicit or explicit instruction (see Chapter 3). However, if children are constantly having to adapt to very different forms of 'instruction', that apprenticeship will be disjointed and perplexing rather than enlightening. For this reason, home/setting links and partnership with parent figures are essential.

Rowan and Honan (2005) provide examples of the difficulties of working in partnership, such as the use of 'book boxes'. Here, children take home books from a range of reading schemes and the parents are expected to read these with their children and sign to affirm they have done so. This appears to be the setting/school working with the home. But as Rowan and Honan (2005: 212) remark, 'school reading practices and processes are taken into the home while the home literary practices are ignored'. Brooker (2005: 128) similarly highlights that there are barriers between parents and early years settings, particularly where families are from minority or socio-economically disadvantaged groups. These barriers however can be overcome by 'serious and respectful listening and not by a home-school dialogue which assumes the school is always right'. Other families are sometimes described as 'hard-to-reach' for other reasons such as isolation and lack of transport in remoter rural areas and here it might be a matter of resources for outreach workers although as Cortis et al (2009) working in Australia found, obtaining sufficiently skilled workers and the funding to pay for them can be a problem. There are also members of families who are difficult to engage such as fathers. The research by Hogg et al (2010) described above highlighted this difficulty because, although they sent out

invitations to all parents of children aged under four years in the designated area, only one father compared to 11 mothers volunteered to participate. In many of the various cultures of the UK, mothers still have the prime responsibility for child care and fathers tend to be the main breadwinners (Daniel and Taylor, 2001; Potter and Carpenter, 2010). This explains why it might be difficult for fathers to engage readily with settings particularly when this requires their involvement during weekday working hours. Arguably, rather than parents and families being hard-to-reach it could be argued that some settings are hard-to-reach for some parents particularly if they are geographically distant, unfamiliar or unwelcoming to some parents, particularly those from minority groups, or providing services at time when parents cannot access them.

Despite these concerns and warnings, there are many examples of effective home–setting partnerships. Potter and Carpenter (2010) for instance outline the inclusion of fathers in Sure Start settings. McDonald (2010) provides a variety of strategies for engaging with disadvantaged families and although written for an Australian readership is applicable elsewhere. A further example of close links between setting and home is the Pen Green Centre in Corby. This is an early years provision for families focusing on community regeneration, together with family support and education for young children, including those in need and with special needs. From its inception in 1983, it has highlighted the importance of finding out from parents what is needed rather than ‘imposing a predetermined “neat and tidy” plan’ (Whalley, 2001: 128). It operates on the basis of inclusion of parents with parent groups and meetings to inform policy. Parents were encouraged to record their children at home and share these recordings with the staff, while they were also involved in curriculum development at the Centre. The project has also successfully engaged fathers by not only inviting them to the general activities but also running groups at the weekend such as Dad’s Group and Dad’s Baby Massage and having men’s circuit training on weekday evenings.

Draper and Duffy (2001) explored the involvement of fathers in early years provision. They experienced the inevitable issue of working fathers who were unable to attend daytime activities. Nevertheless, they found that fathers were committed to their children’s development

and education and felt the staff were welcoming. However, centre activities and the attitudes of other parents meant that they were reluctant to become directly involved in the centre. A Scottish Government document (2003: para 72) also highlighted that:

fathers reported that they found family support services almost entirely staffed and attended by women, and however welcoming the service or other users, they felt very isolated. Some of the professionals we interviewed were dismissive of the men they came into contact with.

Fathers of young children face problems which are not an issue for mothers. For example, when out and about with children still needing help with toileting, it is easy for a mother to take her pre-school son into a female public convenience but it is not so acceptable for a father to take his young daughter into the men's toilets. Clearly, when setting policies, practitioners need to ensure that working in partnership extends to fathers as well as mothers. Fathers can usefully be given opportunities to discuss their concerns openly, preferably with other men facing the same issues. In the longer term, the encouragement of more men into early years occupations might help fathers to feel more included.

Another issue highlighted by Draper and Duffy (2001) is the need to address parents' own expectations. They worked at the Thomas Coram Early Excellence Centre, which like Pen Green encouraged parental involvement and engagement. However, they found that at another centre, a proportion of parents had very different ideas about 'what is good for children' and were resistant to involvement in the centre. Some came from cultures where nursery provision was extensive but where nursery staff expected the parents to disappear quickly at the start of the session in order to avoid 'upsetting' their children who would then, in the staff's opinion, not be able to concentrate and learn. Parental involvement appeared to them to mean they were questioning the expertise of the centre staff.

An example provided by Anning (1998) endorses the Pen Green philosophy of respecting the expertise of parents, even in the case where parents are struggling or seem vulnerable. Anning describes how the manager of an inner-city early years centre focused on communication between vulnerable mothers and their babies. She wanted to ensure that her

staff gained insights into ways of working with parents and children which avoided de-skilling the parents. Jointly with a speech therapist, the manager introduced relaxed but carefully planned workshops and modelled 'motherese' through play with mothers as well as their babies. The mothers learned that their ability to parent was validated rather than being distrusted.

The case study of Alexander further highlights some of the issues for children with substitute families. For Alexander, joining the nursery setting will not be his first transition. He is used to frequent changes, has lived in a number of different families and has had some very challenging early life experiences. He might be aggressive or withdrawn, and have difficulty trusting adults and forming relationships with his peers. Although he has every right to be angry, actions which harm, distress or alienate others will need to be addressed. His early experiences will impact on his learning and any practitioners involved in his education, in the broadest sense, will have to assess his needs to ensure that his learning opportunities are maximized to the full and that early gaps in his learning are identified and addressed. Indeed, part of the role of the early years worker will be to contribute to the Common Assessment Framework (DfES, 2007c) that will assess the needs of children from a multi-professional perspective.

The other issue for early years workers is to recognize that Alexander has different families. He will probably continue to have contact with his mother and his maternal grandparents and any aunts or uncles. Even if there is no mention of a father, Alexander might have a father and a set of relatives on his father's side. He has been with his current foster carers for over a year and at such a crucial stage in his life, that is the transition from baby/toddler to schoolboy, they form an important family for him. However, early years workers may also have to relate to the new adoptive parents. Even if Alexander has not moved in with them during his time in the nursery school or reception class, he may well be starting to form a relationship with his potential adoptive parents which he might talk about as his 'forever' parents. Recognizing and respecting Alexander's divided loyalties and acknowledging the importance of each of these families in his life require skill and understanding on the part of

early years workers.

There is one final point to make in relation to home–school/setting partnerships which relates to child protection. Involving parents in their children’s learning is hugely beneficial. However, early years workers need to guard against putting their relationship with the parents before the child’s welfare in those, albeit few, instances where children are being neglected, physically or emotionally abused or sexually exploited by their carers.

SUMMARY

Family life for children can be very diverse and understanding and valuing the child within the ecological context of their family is important for those working with them. Most early years practitioners are careful not to make assumptions about families and ensure they see each child and their circumstances as unique. However, the chapter provides an additional focus on the further factors impacting on children who do not live with their birth parents.

As the previous discussion has illustrated, family policy has taken on increased significance since 1997, though the change in government in 2010 marked a shift in policy towards a more targeted approach with a focus on early intervention and parents taking greater control over family life. Furthermore, working in partnership with parents has been integral to policy drivers aimed at developing services for children and their families. Links between the home and early years settings and schools are therefore very important to support the child’s later life outcomes. This is not just because policies dictate this approach, but because children’s development will be adversely affected if there is no harmony between the various spheres of a child’s life, especially between the key domains of the family and their wider services with which they are engaged.

Questions for reflection and discussion

1. In what ways do you think your own family life impacts on you as a person?
2. Why do you think it is important for workers in the early years to understand the diversity of family life?

3. How do you think settings can support children who are being looked after and/or are in local authority care?

Recommended reading

Aveni, D. and Perry, A. (2011) *Working with Fathers: Practical and Effective Ways to Increase Father Participation in Early Years Settings*. Crediton: Southgate Publishers.

Potter, C. and Olley, R. (eds) (2012) *Engaging Fathers in the Early Years: A Practitioner's Guide*. London: Continuum Publishing Group.

Trodd, L (ed) (2013) *Transitions in the Early Years: Working with children and families*. London: Sage

Whalley, M. & Arnold, C. (2013) *Working with Families in Children's Centres and Early Years Settings*. London: Hodder Education.

Guishard-Pine, J., Mccall, S. and Hamilton, L. (2007) *Understanding Looked After Children: Psychology for Foster Care*. London: Jessica Kingsley.

Recommended websites

Department for Education: www.education.gov.uk

Joseph Rowntree Foundation: www.jrf.org.uk/

National Academy for Parenting Research: <http://www.parentingresearch.org.uk/publications.aspx>

Office for National Statistics. Video Summary: Families and Households in England and Wales, 2011

<http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/rel/census/2011-census/key-statistics-and-quick-statistics-for-wards-and-output-areas-in-england-and-wales/video-summary-families.html>