

Going beyond supervised contact: Developing a more holistic service model which facilitates child focused parenting.

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Building Bridges Together, established in 1996, comprises seven supervised children's contact services in South East Queensland. Services are funded by the (Federal) Attorney-General's Department, for Family Court clients, and on a contractual basis for the (State) Department of Child Safety. Identified gaps in the current narrow model of supervised contact service provision, mean that the costs and risks of maintaining contact outweigh the benefits, for some children. When the primary focus is on making contact *happen*, the fundamental objective of making contact *work* to achieve safe, meaningful and sustainable outcomes for children may be jeopardised. There are tensions between expectations on, and funding for, services to facilitate safe contact, and those required for services to heal, build or strengthen child-parent relationships and progress cases to independent management.

Core assumptions that wounded psyches, malicious motivations and unresolved conflicts undermine the development of successful and sustainable contact arrangements have obscured recognition of underlying genuine concerns for children's safety and well-being. What has been observed at a grass-roots level is an insufficient acknowledgment and relief of these concerns by requiring parallel parental involvement in developing parenting insights, skills and capacity.

The experience of children having supervised contact in the face of a complex web of factors impeding relationship repair or development is fraught with difficulties. Their felt experience of inaccessible security is described by six year-old Molly's dream: "I was running away from Dad, in my dream. I ran towards Mum, and went to hug her, but she shattered into a thousand pieces". One dream. One child. A sliver of understanding of how it feels, to be little, vulnerable, needy, to reach out, but not to receive what the heart needs.

The model described herein has been developed in response to children's expressed needs, and to facilitate their rights to have a safe and loving relationship with both parents where possible. Clients referred to supervised contact services need wrap-around services provided in parallel, which are affordable, accessible, and specialised to meet needs for containing the conflict, and redirecting the parents' focus to the children's needs.

The integrated model described herein recognizes the complexity, and dynamic interplay of nested intra-psychic, relational, historical and systemic factors which can contribute to poor outcomes, and which require early therapeutic intervention. The model is responsive to the shared experiences of children for whom supervised contact feels safe 'on the outside' but does not feel safe 'on the inside'. The model overcomes the current lack of comprehensive assessment prior to ordering supervision of contact, which in some cases is later found not to be in the child's best interests, or ill-timed in relation to the level of readiness or capacity of parents to be child-focused.

Therapeutic opportunities provided by the case-managed model give voice to the silence of children's felt experience, and make explicit their concerns and needs. This model dismantles the experience of invalidation of children's prior experiences by a supervised contact environment which appears to promote 'pretend good visits' or 'fake smiling behaviour', maintain family secrets, and by its silence, condone frightening parental behaviour. It provides opportunity for children to voice their anger at being required to attend contact against their expressed wishes, or their confusion when they perceive a double image of their visiting parent who they cynically describe as 'pretending to be nice' but who is 'not like this at home'. There is opportunity to free children from the burden of being the emotional prop of their parents, assisting their learning to identify and express their own needs. Children subjected to parents' vilification of the other, and those torn between divided loyalties can articulate their distress. Of primary importance, the integrated model provisions for children's ongoing emotional needs, by therapeutic and educative work with their parents.

The proposed model relies on a case managed approach, providing comprehensive assessment to inform individually determined levels of supervised, facilitated or therapeutically facilitated contact, parent mentoring, parenting workshops and support groups for children. Parent mentoring, in addition to required attendance at parent workshops, enables individualised support and therapeutic resolution of issues which impede support of contact.

The model involves case managed transitioning through progressively less intensive supervision formats, including group supervision on centre and on community outings. Periodic feedback in case consultations keeps parents informed and encourages their contribution to child-focused decision-making. Contact arrangements can be progressed to independent management, without recourse to the Courts in some cases, minimizing the exacerbation of conflict through exposure to adversarial legal processes.

A third tier of supervision provides options for cases which require longer term supervision, whereby trained volunteer family support workers are allocated to provide ongoing supervision in the least restrictive environment without compromising safety.

The need for evidence-based practice has been respected by planned evaluations of the effectiveness of this model in achieving superior outcomes, compared to control groups of clients in other Building Bridges Together services where the model is not yet available.

In the absence of research to validate the utility of contact, even supervised contact, in high conflict cases, we are at risk of repeating mistakes evidenced throughout history of well intentioned practices which are later found to not have the intended value. There are readily identifiable problems with narrow supervised contact service models in not addressing or assisting the resolution of issues which clients bring to supervised contact, and which necessitate the return of many clients to the children's contact service, after contact has broken down. Contact is maintained for some children at great costs, and with questionable value.

It is timely to consider alternative models which address deeper needs, and which not only protect children from the ravages of enduring conflict, but which meet their needs for safe and responsive parenting by both parents. "The opportunity for children to know and have a relationship with both of their parents ... must not become a mantra. This [contact] should only happen when the relationship enriches the child" (Nicholson 2002).

Reference

Nicholson, A. 2002. Australian Initiatives: Enforcement in difficult Contact cases Early Interventions - A Framework for Contact, The Royal Society, London, 27 March 2002