

RESEARCH BRIEFING

CHILD AND FAMILY SOCIAL WORK IN THE CONTEXT OF COVID-19: CURRENT PRACTICE ISSUES AND INNOVATIONS



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MARCH 2020 – JUNE 2020

PROJECT TEAM Dr Laura L. Cook and Dr Danny Zschomler

FUNDER British Academy/Leverhulme Trust

WHY IS THIS STUDY IMPORTANT?

On the 23rd of March 2020, the government announced a period of lockdown in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. This marked the beginning of rapid change for Children's Services. Following the introduction of social distancing measures, social workers needed to move quickly to reconfigure the support provided to children, young people, families and carers. A rapid research study was undertaken investigating how social workers have responded to the challenges of social distancing in their work with families.

AIMS

The study aimed to identify the possibilities, risks and future implications of 'virtual' social work practice.

HOW WAS THE STUDY DONE?

Qualitative telephone interviews were undertaken with 31 child and family social workers across 9 local authorities (LAs) in England, as part of an ongoing research project. The findings are based on data collected during the period immediately before and after the announcement of lockdown. It captures social workers' perspectives on their work as the pandemic unfolded.

FINDINGS

Key Messages

- Children and families must be consulted about the recent changes to social work practice.
- Virtual working affords unexpected benefits for social work with children and families, particularly for engaging with young people.
- Virtual engagement has limitations, particularly for child protection and assessment work.
- Virtual home visits create additional risks for professional judgement – particularly around identifying hidden risks.
- Professionals must proactively address barriers to digital inclusion to ensure families have a voice within virtual meetings and reviews.
- Remote working has significant impacts on child and family social workers – these must be addressed to ensure worker wellbeing and retention.

The four key areas of change each presented unexpected possibilities as well as challenges and risks.

1. The immediate impact of lockdown on social work practice

- Local authorities needed to move quickly to reconfigure the support provided to children and families.
- Almost all social workers reported undertaking rapid 'RAG' (Red Amber Green) risk-ratings of all existing cases, prioritising as 'red' families/ children needing essential face to face visits, and/or frequent virtual visits. Families at 'amber' or 'green' typically had virtual contact.
- For essential face-to-face visits, infection risks for both social worker and family were weighed against the necessity of the visit. These decisions were made within social work teams on a case-by-case basis.
- Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) was required for essential visits. The majority of social workers said that their LAs had moved quickly to ensure theirs and families' safety, providing PPE where needed.
- Social workers described a dramatic drop in professional referrals to Children's Services but an increase in referrals from neighbours around domestic abuse and mental health issues among children and young people.
- A surge of referrals and increased demand on services was expected once children return to school.

Social workers expressed concerns about the unintended consequences of prioritising high-risk cases:

- Families' interactions with services could become more coercive and concerned with 'risk monitoring' rather than meaningful support.
- Some families were being contacted 'too frequently' which could be oppressive and intrusive.
- The prioritisation of high risk cases could lead to a long-term increase in thresholds for support, or could act as justification for a 'cost cutting agenda'.

Recommendations

- Local authorities (LAs) need to be alert to the risks of inadvertently increasing coercive family involvement with Children's Services. At the time of this research, systems were rapidly being developed to audit contacts with high priority 'high risk' cases. This may compel social workers to prioritise carrying out and recording less meaningful contacts with families. It is essential that risk assessments made in the weeks following lockdown are regularly re-visited and reviewed.
- LAs may need to anticipate additional capacity for intake and assessment services in the months following children's return to school. This is an area of social work with a high reliance on agency staff. These agency staff may have been redeployed elsewhere due to the initial drop in referrals. LAs will need to ensure sufficient capacity to meet demand over the coming months.

2. Virtual engagement with children and families

Following lockdown, the way that social workers engaged with children and families changed overnight. All but the most urgent home visits were replaced by virtual interactions. Virtual

engagement with children was challenging, particularly for younger children. However, as lockdown continued, many social workers expressed great surprise at the unexpected possibilities afforded by virtual practice. Social workers described a range of creative ways to engage with children during virtual calls, including asking children to take them on a 'virtual tour' of the house, using bright and engaging backdrops for video calls and, for younger children, shared singing/nursery rhymes to orientate them towards the screen.

The benefits of virtual engagements with families

- The 'little and often' approach encouraged by virtual working was welcomed by some families. Many social workers described developing closer relationships with families and becoming more familiar with their everyday lives during lockdown.
- Social workers could be more responsive to families where needed.
- Virtual communication was greatly preferred by some service users, particularly by looked after young people/adolescents.
- Families could share their views with social workers more openly when using text/instant messaging. This was surprising to many workers who regarded text messages as less appropriate.
- Not having to travel left some workers feeling more energised and focused in their interactions with families. They could also offer support to a greater number of service users across the working day.

Risks of virtual engagement with families

- Not all families had the internet at home or could afford the data costs associated with video calls.
- Virtual engagement was far less effective without a prior social work relationship with the child, parent or carer.

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- Virtual home visits had significant limitations for initial assessments and high risk cases where there were child welfare concerns.
- It could be more difficult to assess the home environment and to pick up on important cues and sensory information.
- Detecting ‘hidden risks’ was difficult during virtual home visits. Many social workers felt that their judgments about child safety were ‘less robust’ as a result.
- Workers were concerned that they would be blamed for difficult decisions made in these circumstances.
- It was difficult to ensure confidentiality and safety during virtual visits. Social workers had no way of knowing who might be listening to the call. This was a particular issue when talking to children at risk of abuse/neglect and parents experiencing domestic abuse.
- Virtual communication could be inappropriate for sensitive topics. Social workers could not convey empathy and reassurance as effectively as they could in-person.
- Technology failures could be disruptive and upsetting for families, as well as frustrating for social workers.

3. Family participation in meetings and reviews

Despite the relaxations to the requirements for reviews in the DfE Coronavirus (2020) guidance, social workers continued to hold looked after children reviews, fostering and adoption panels and child protection conferences. These were conducted virtually, which had implications for children, young people, parents and carers’ participation in decisions about their care. The majority of social workers described using Microsoft Teams for meetings and reviews and a minority described using Zoom, WhatsApp and FaceTime.

Benefits of virtual meetings for family participation in meetings and reviews

- Families participating from their home often felt more relaxed and confident to contribute than when sitting with other professionals in a formal setting.
- Virtual meetings could offer greater autonomy for some family members. Parents and carers were often on different devices, and young people might be in another room on a separate device.
- There was dramatically improved participation for young people in meetings and reviews. WhatsApp or FaceTime felt less ‘professionalised’. Being the ‘tech experts’ altered the power dynamic within meetings, helping to build young people’s confidence and increasing their involvement.
- Virtual meetings allowed for staged participation where young children and less confident young people could ‘listen in’ to the meeting via a parent or carer’s device and join later if/when they felt comfortable.

Risks of virtual meetings for family participation in meetings and reviews

- Socioeconomic status and living in an area of deprivation are risk factors for digital exclusion.
- Requiring the support of a translator made virtual meetings more complex, especially where translation services did not offer conference calling or video calls.
- Unlike professionals, most families had not become familiar with Microsoft Teams, preferring FaceTime, WhatsApp or Zoom which placed them at a disadvantage.
- Some social workers expressed confusion about which platforms could be safely used for confidential meetings.

- Where parents or children became distressed during meetings, social workers reported difficulties in catching the ‘build up’ to this – especially if bandwidth limitations meant that video had to be switched off to speed up the connection.
- When family members left the call it was difficult to know whether they were upset, or whether the internet connection had been lost.

Recommendations

- When inviting families to participate in reviews and meetings, professionals need to consider the four barriers to digital inclusion (access, skills, confidence and motivation) and how these might be overcome on a case-by-case basis.
- LAs need to consider replacing travel grants for families to attend meetings with grants for WiFi/additional data.
- Social workers should undertake pre-meeting check-ins with families to ensure they are able to participate, to offer reassurance about what will happen and to address any worries or concerns.
- Professionals chairing meetings need to regularly check-in with families during meetings.
- Chairs may need to consider alternatives to Microsoft Teams where this is a barrier to family participation.
- LAs need to provide clear guidance on secure platforms for sharing information and those which present security risks.
- Professionals should encourage staged participation during meetings, not pressuring but also keeping open, opportunities for family participation throughout the video call.
- There is an urgent need for consult children, young people, parents and carers about their perspectives on virtual meetings.

4. Social worker wellbeing and team support

Aside from infrequent urgent home visits, social workers reported working exclusively from home during lockdown. The informal support provided within social work teams has been identified as key to social worker resilience and wellbeing. Social workers therefore needed to navigate a new way of staying in touch with colleagues.

Working from home – what worked well?

- Social worker funding to purchase equipment for working at homes assisted with remote working and helped workers to feel valued and positive about the new working conditions.
- Those already working at home tended to feel more confident about the changes.
- Opportunities to ‘check in’ with colleagues outside of more formal virtual team meetings were valued.
- Text-based ways of keeping in touch outside of video calls were valued – eg team WhatsApp groups.
- Most felt ‘very well supported’ or ‘more supported’ than usual as a result of keeping in touch with colleagues virtually. Some reported that within team relationships were closer and stronger.
- Social workers with caring responsibilities during the day valued managers who offered flexibility to log-on after hours.

Working from home – what were the challenges?

- Juggling childcare and home schooling alongside emotive and challenging work with families.
- For a minority these demands were unmanageable leading some to consider whether they wanted to stay in the profession.

- Having a workspace at home, and after hours contact with colleagues could erode the boundaries between work and home life.
- Loss of travel time could reduce opportunities to reflect and pause between tasks and result in back-to-back virtual visits and meetings.
- Loss of face-to-face interaction could make it difficult for social workers to recognise when a team member was struggling and needed support.
- Informal peer discussions would have naturally taken place in the office. Now a conscious choice was required to phone a colleague which could lead to a sense of isolation.
- Loss of vicarious and opportunistic learning opportunities for Newly Qualified Social Workers.
- Informal ways of keeping in touch could emphasise difficult team dynamics and silence marginalised team members.
- Staying connected was more of a challenge for newer, less established teams and temporary staff.
- Team managers can play a vital role in scaffolding how workers stay in touch. This may include being alert to difficult dynamics and getting in touch with workers who are less vocal online. This is particularly important for new teams workers new to the team.
- There is an urgent need to consider how to support NQSWs within virtual child and family social work. This may include virtual shadowing opportunities, such as joining colleagues for virtual home visits or 'buddying' with more experienced workers.
- Supervisors should help social workers to consider the 'blind spots' in assessment that may emerge as a result of virtual home visiting.

IMPACT

A fuller briefing for practitioners: Cook, L. L. and Zschomler D. (2020) *Child and family social work in the context of COVID-19: practice issues and innovations. Briefing Paper*. Norwich: CRCF - is available at <http://www.uea.ac.uk/crcf>

Recommendations

- Social workers described helpful strategies for 'switching off' from work. This included muting work discussions on instant messaging services after a certain time, closing their laptop and putting it away as a psychological way of 'clocking off'. Identifying strategies that allowed them to draw a psychological boundary around work enabled workers to manage working from home.

FIND OUT MORE

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