

Evaluation of **FAMILY RIGHTS GROUP'S ADVICE SERVICE** Executive Summary **2010**

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FAMILY RIGHTS GROUP ADVICE LINE

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY OF KEY FINDINGS

Purpose of the Evaluation

Family Rights Group, a registered charity, offers a confidential advice line for families and other interested parties in England and Wales. The line, which is free to callers, offers advice to parents and others whose children are involved with social care services. It also sends out written information and advice sheets to families and others who require further clarification of the issues. The advice line, which is just one of the services offered by Family Rights Group, is available from 10am to 3.30pm, Monday to Friday. It is a confidential service, although where information is revealed that leads the adviser to think that a child 'is suffering or is likely to suffer significant harm', she will encourage the caller to refer the matter to the appropriate agency, or if the caller is unwilling to do so, the adviser may pass the information on to the relevant agency and in so doing, notify the caller accordingly.

This evaluation sought to establish how well the advice line meets the needs of its users, to identify any gaps in service provision, and to explore the extent to which it provides the service to which Family Rights Group aspires, namely, to help people 'to understand their rights, and explore the issues which have arisen between the family and children's social care services, in order that they may make realistic choices about the options available to them.'¹

METHODOLOGY

Sample

Data for this research came from a sample of 50 telephone interviews with respondents who had used the Family Rights Group advice line between 1 July

¹ Taken from http://www.frg.org.uk/advice_service.html

2009 and 31 July 2010.. Quota sampling was used to ensure that those contacted broadly reflected the proportion of type of call made to the advice line. It was made clear to the respondents that the researcher was not a member of Family Rights Group but an independent evaluator, and that all information would be held anonymously, with respondents free to decline any question or to stop the interview at any point.

Measures

The questionnaire incorporated questions designed to elicit both quantitative and qualitative data. In addition, two specific measures were used:

The General Health Questionnaire-12

The GHQ was designed by Goldberg (1978) to identify non-psychotic psychiatric disorder in people in both community and medical settings using a self-report questionnaire. Although designed to evaluate 'current state', it has demonstrated significant predictive validity with regard to the future use of mental health care (Berwick et al, 1987). In this research, in line with the Health Survey for England, a cut off score of 4 or above using the bimodal scoring method has been used to identify elevated scores, indicating a high level of psychological distress.

Data

The questionnaire contained a balance of closed and open questions, and generated both quantitative and qualitative data.

Ethics

The research was undertaken in accordance with the ethical codes of the British Association of Social Workers and the Social Research Association.

KEY FINDINGS

Respondent Profile

- The majority of respondents (54%) were parents, with 23% fathers and 77% mothers.
- The remainder of respondents were family members, mainly grandparents, raising children who are unable to live with their parents (22%) or relatives without care responsibilities (24%). The latter includes grandparents seeking to take on the full care of their grandchildren or family members ringing on behalf of others in their family
- Just over a quarter of respondents were male (26%) with 74% female.
- Half of the sample was unwaged and Lone or single respondents were significantly more likely to be on low incomes ($p < .01$).
- A high proportion, 36% of respondents had scores of 4+ using GHQ bimodal scoring - almost double that found in the Health Survey for England 2005 and the Health Survey for Scotland 2003.
- Of parents or kinship carers, 42% had GHQ-12 bimodal scores of 4+ indicating high levels of psychological distress, compared with only 19% of those who were non-carers.

What Were Their Concerns?

- Those involved with looked after children, and specifically grandparents, had the highest levels of psychological disturbance and abnormal functioning, with 50% having scores of 4+ using GHQ-12 bimodal scoring.
- This group were also the most likely to be unwaged, and at 71% had the highest proportion of callers with three or more additional stressors.
- Grandparents' ability to promote the welfare of the child may be being compromised by lack of information and both practical and financial support.
- Children who cannot live with their parents appear to be at risk of poor outcomes through lack of statutory support. Grandparents who looked after children felt financially and practically unsupported, unsure of their rights or legal position, and let down by social services. Yet this group of carers is key in ensuring good outcomes for children who cannot live with their parents.
- Those involved in care proceedings were the second most vulnerable group, with 42% having abnormal levels of psychological functioning, and 67% experiencing three or more additional stressors.
- Those involved in care proceedings tended not to understand their situation, to feel a sense of injustice, to want to know how to acquire contact or the return of a child. Grandparents felt ill-informed and sometimes overlooked as potential carers.
- There may be a gap in social work training which consequently leaves the most vulnerable parents and grandparents desperately searching for advice.

- The overriding theme amongst those wanting family support was callers feeling let down by social services and wanting to know how to access the support they needed.
- Those seeking family support were far more likely to have financial problems or to be disabled or have disabled children.
- Amongst those involved with child protection, there tended to be a feeling that social workers had not understood their needs. Many also wanted knowledge of their legal and human rights.
- It may be important to ensure that young people in care are given appropriate teaching in child development and parenting skills as well as follow-up support, both in care and as young parents, to enable them to cope well with their own children, and to avoid the need for intergenerational care proceedings.

What Did Callers Think of the Advice Line and Support?

- Nearly all callers (92%) had contacted other agencies for help with only partial or no success. This research suggests that Family Rights Group has a highly capable and knowledgeable advice line which is possibly unique in England and Wales. Although as a charity its funds will be limited, it would also seem that it may need to advertise more widely, for example, by acquiring a more prominent web presence on the sites of other agencies.
- The overwhelming majority of callers (94%) found the advice line helpful.

- Callers value Family Rights Group's advice line because they are listened to, and are given clear, knowledgeable and appropriate information
- Family Rights Group appear to hold a niche position in this field. Callers particularly valued the fact that Family Rights Group were independent and to these callers' knowledge, the sole purveyor (with the exception of solicitors) of such a wide range of legal and family rights-related knowledge.
- The vast majority of callers reported the call having made a change in their practical or emotional well-being. No negative impacts were reported. Only four callers said that nothing had changed.
- All callers felt it important that the advice line should exist and with one exception, all callers would recommend it to others, and some had already done so.
- Advice sheets are also particularly useful and empowering for parents in meetings, and enabling them to understand and to take part.
- Thematic analysis of the qualitative data around any identified need for improvement showed that the most important theme was that the line could not be improved, followed by the need to advertise more widely, and a desire for face-to-face provision and longer opening hours (including evenings).

Were Outcomes Improved?

- There were no negative impacts and in the vast majority of cases, when asked whether calling the advice line had made a difference, callers said that it had improved outcomes for them in a practical or emotional way.

- Outcomes were improved across all areas, including understanding of the law and rights, improved partnership working, improved chances of maintaining contact, a greater likelihood of staying together as a family, their understanding of their children's needs, their levels of stress and their ability to obtain the support they needed.
- There were statistically significant correlations between respondents feeling that they had been helped to understand the issues (88%) and feeling better able to cope, more confident about dealing with the situation, report of improved partnership working, family/friends carers finding that things are better, improved confidence dealing with social workers and other professionals, feeling that they had been helped to obtain the support needed, and feeling enabled to resolve their problems.
- In particular, a very high proportion of respondents felt that they understood the issues better, had improved their partnership working and had been helped to obtain the support that they needed.
- The vast majority of family/friends carers reported being more confident when dealing with social workers/other professionals, to have improved contact with the child or children in question, and to have a better relationship with the child/children with 74% saying that things were now better than before they made the call.
- Qualitative data showed both how the right advice can empower and enable callers, and how improved partnership working can produce more positive outcomes than might otherwise have been anticipated.
- There is some evidence that levels of psychological distress, as measured by the GHQ-12, may have been reduced amongst those (the majority)

who experienced positive outcomes. This may suggest that receiving the correct advice that enables respondents to cope more effectively with their circumstances is also linked to reducing stress and improving psychological function.

Cost Benefit Analysis

Key Findings

- 80% of callers reported improved partnership working with social workers and other professionals. The benefits associated with improved partnership working are likely to reduce costs to the public purse engendered by delays in assessment, consequent delays in Court/Care proceedings, likely associated increased risk of 'significant harm', and consequent poor child outcomes.
- 88% of callers reported having a better understanding of the issues involved. This was significantly linked with them feeling better able to cope, feeling more confident about dealing with their situation, improved partnership working and feeling enabled to resolve their problems. These findings are likely to promote parental participation and reduce aggressive and passive-aggressive behaviours, including resistance, which frustrate professionals' ability to carry out assessments and to promote the welfare of the child.
- 70% of callers reported obtaining advice that enabled them to obtain the support they needed. This in turn is likely to reduce the costs associated with s.47 (Children Act 1989) inquiries, and to reduce parental stress which in itself is associated with greater risk for child maltreatment.

- 100% of grandparents felt that their chances of contact with a grandchild had improved following their call, with 90% feeling more confident in their dealings with social workers/professionals and 60% reporting that the advice they received had helped the family to stay together. Grandparent involvement is likely to provide better outcomes for children, and outcomes for children placed in their care have been shown to be at least as good, and sometimes better than 'stranger' care. By contrast, the cost of 'stranger' foster care, including the cost in financial and emotional terms of more moves in care, are likely to be considerably higher.
- 64% reported that the advice they received had improved their parenting, which is likely to improve child outcomes and to reduce the cost to the state associated with delinquency, poor educational achievement, health and risk of significant harm.
- 94% of respondents found the advice line helpful and valued being listened to and being given clear, knowledgeable and appropriate information. How parents feel about the support they receive is critical to the likelihood of further engagement and provides them with the agency necessary for partnership working.

'I'd still be running around like a crazy woman not knowing what was going on. I wouldn't have got to the case conference. . . It's so important to have something in place to help parents, other than social workers.'

'You can't improve it any more. It's very good'

The End