Presenters: Stephanie Holt, Sadhbh Whelan & Eavan Brady

Contact Information: sholt@tcd.ie

Theme to which paper is aligned: Supporting Parents through Programmes and Practices
Abstract

Title: Using Relationships to Improve Relationships

Drawing selectively on findings from an evaluation of an Irish family support service, this paper argues that irrespective of the broad approach to family support provision or specific methods used, family support with vulnerable families begins and ends with an emphasis on the relationship between the worker and the family members. Given that many of the problems vulnerable families experience stem from dysfunctional or abusive relationships, it stands to reason that a relationship-based focus has the potential to help families to identify what is going wrong.

Both qualitative and quantitative data was gathered for the purpose of this evaluation. The qualitative approach employed in-depth individual and joint semi-structured interviews, a focus group discussion and both participant and non-participant observation. In total, four groups were observed (involving 12 group participants); five children aged between five and 12 years participated in individual interviews; ten parents (eight mothers and two fathers) participated in six individual and two joint interviews; eight CHFSS staff participated in individual interviews and one joint interview; six Board of Management members participated in a focus group interview; and thirteen related professionals participated in individual interviews.

This evaluation found that by developing significant relationships with parents, difficult discussions around risk, capacity and need could meaningfully take place, resulting in clear improvements in other relationships – those parents had with their children and with other professionals. An emphasis on relationship-based practice was not confined to the worker-client relationship but also infused the approach to inter-professional and inter-agency work. Participating professionals in this evaluation identified the strength of the relationship they had with the CHFSS emerging from a foundation that was based on trust arising from the reliability of the CHFSS to follow through with plans and with families, their skill and expertise and in particular their ability to hold and manage risk.