Organisation: One Family

Theme: Connecting Child Protection and Family Support systems

Abstract:
a concise summary of what will be presented, including a title, clear aim of presentation, and the contribution to knowledge or new learning that will occur.

Child Contact Centres: bridging family conflicts, child protection and family law

The presentation will briefly outline the evidence base for the design of the Child Contact Centre pilot, will provide an overview of the work undertaken in the service and detail the main practice and policy findings of the independent evaluation of the pilot.

The aim of the presentation is to highlight opportunities that can be taken to bridge the chasms that exist between private family law cases, child protection issues, ancillary family support services to courts and the needs of children in high-conflict separated families.

This is a rapidly evolving area due to modernised family legislation, upcoming reform of the family law courts and the still relatively new Tusla Child & Family Agency.

Policy opportunities exist in the development of regulations to implement the Children & Family Relationships Bill as well as in a consolidated approach to child protection by Tusla personnel. Legal opportunities exist to strengthen the provision of family support services including Child Contact Centres in family law court reform and the promised two year review of the Children & Family Relationships Bill. These must be capitalised on to ensure the safety and best interest of children in private family law cases where there are child protection concerns. This is currently a poorly understood and resourced issue and there is no system whereby the family courts and statutory child protection systems can communicate effectively about issues affecting children.

Policy concerns from the evaluation range from issues such as the need for family law courts to make evidence-based decisions; to the fact that children may currently be court-ordered into unsafe or unsuitable contact/access; that some children will choose not to have contact with their non-resident parent when consulted appropriately; and that a resident parent cannot be the ‘protective parent’ if the child has unsupervised contact with an abuser.

(299 words)