

Appendix 1 to Report of the Supporting Families Task Group

The Task Group felt that it would be useful to illustrate the mechanics and potential impact of the type of approach the Surrey Family Support Programme and the Government's Troubled Families Programme aims to implement.

Here is a case study of the family intervention approach, taken from the DCLG paper "Working with Troubled Families – A Guide to the Evidence and Good Practice." This case study was provided by the Family Intervention Project in Yorkshire in December 2012.

Case study

Mel, a lone parent lived with three children, Tara 12, Jade, 10 and Jack 8. Mel had had a difficult childhood largely due to influence of her mum's partner who had both physically and sexually abused her. Mel described him as 'evil' and had spent much of her childhood trying to escape him. She said she had wanted to protect her mum from the domestic violence she endured but had been 'too afraid'. Mel had 'gone off the rails' in her early teens and started using alcohol and drugs. She had her first baby when she was 15 which was premature and died shortly after birth. She then had her second child at 16 and another when she was 18. The relationships with the fathers of her children did not last as they were abusive to her.

When family intervention became involved with the family, there were regular complaints about anti-social behaviour at the property Mel lived with her children. Mel was now a chronic amphetamine user, who refused to leave her house, but regularly allowed other drug users in. There were regular reports of noisy and rowdy behaviour at the property. All three children were regularly failing to attend school. Tara, the older daughter had serious behavioural issues and was about to be excluded. She was also believed by agencies to be at risk of sexual exploitation as was regularly out late unsupervised often with some of the people frequenting the property. All three children were on child protection plans and at risk of being removed into care.

Dedicated workers, dedicated to families

A worker from the Family Intervention Project, Elaine, was assigned to the family and although the door was opened, Elaine received a very hostile reaction from Mel who tried in various ways to get rid of her. Her approach was to empathise with the mum, Mel, and try to build the relationship; "I know things are tough right now, but just hear me out"... "I know how difficult it's been, but you know things don't need to be like this."

Practical 'hands on' support

Elaine quickly identified practical help the family needed and promised to personally get involved in sorting this out – as a way of building trust with the family and

showing that she delivered on what she said. For example, the house needed urgent repairs for a leaking roof, but this work had not been possible because the loft area was full of rubbish which needed clearing before work could start. Elaine arrived the next day with 20 bin liners and worked alongside Mel to clear rubbish. Elaine used the opportunity to talk to Mel about her life and find out what had happened to the family and how things had become so out of control. Once the rubbish was cleared the repairs began.

The children's bedrooms were all in a state of serious disrepair. The children told Elaine how desperate they were for these to be cleaned up and decorated. Elaine struck a deal with them and promised that if they made an effort to attend school she would help sort them out.

A persistent, assertive and challenging approach

When Elaine became involved the family were facing eviction and all three children were on child protection plans. Mel had become resistant to agencies' involvement and threats. Elaine sat down with her and explained the different types of action that was imminent and made her see these threats were very real. For example, she was in real danger of having her children removed if she didn't start to provide a safer home environment and some basic standards of parenting.

Considering the family as a whole – gathering the intelligence

Elaine got to know all of the family members and find out about their problems. She spent considerable time with each of the individual children. As relationships were built, Tara the 14 year old confided in her that she was desperate to learn to sing. Elaine agreed to try and help with this if she promised to work on her behaviour and attend school, which she began to do after a few false starts.

Jack the 9 year old boy revealed how upset he had been by the loss of contact with his grandfather some years earlier. His grandfather had been an important and positive person in his life, but had cut off contact with the family as he 'couldn't cope' with Jack's mum's drug use. As Mel started to reduce her drug use through a rehab programme, Elaine worked to bring Grandad back into the picture. His relationships with the children were rebuilt and he became a positive influence in all their lives.

After many weeks, Mel also confided in Elaine that the reason she rarely left the house was because she was embarrassed about her appearance. Her years of amphetamine use had led to her losing most of her teeth and she now couldn't bear to smile or look at herself in the mirror. Elaine helped her get an appointment to be fitted for false teeth which helped with a lot of Elaine's other problems.

Common purpose and agreed action

This family had been known to a host of agencies for many years and despite their best attempts via endless meetings and interventions, very little had changed for the family. At the first case conference she attended Elaine described the atmosphere as being like "everyone sitting under a dark cloud". It felt like everyone had lost hope about this family, agencies had given up and had become stuck, all paying lip service to the plan but without any real optimism about the possibility of change. Elaine brought a fresh perspective to the meeting on the family as a whole; challenging agencies' hopelessness.

For example, given the amount of problems the family were causing their neighbours, perhaps unsurprisingly, the Housing Association had come to the end of the line with the family; the schools had given up on Mel and Tara and were very negative about working with either of them. Elaine acted as an advocate for the family who she knew had potential to change, re-opening communication with these agencies persuading them to give the families a further chance – but based on the evidence she presented of the real efforts they were making to change with the help of the Family Intervention Project.

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