

Abstract

This article looks at the role and responsibilities of independent social workers who are involved in the growing field of identifying and assessing potential kinship family placements. It also seeks to consider some of the professional principles needed to best deal with any of the professional and business conflicts which might occur in such work.

The role and responsibilities of being
an independent social worker
working within the field of kinship family placements

For a variety of political, economic and professional reasons (Sykes / Sinclair / Gibbs / Wilson: 2002, Broad: 2005), the practice of placing 'looked after children' with their extended family and close friends (kinship placements) is once again returning to the forefront of child care planning in the UK.

Despite this change in practice often being referred to as 'innovative', the reality is that it is little more than a requirement of current child care legislation (Children Act 1989 / Adoption and Children Act 2002), which in many ways reflects a reversal of the post-war approach of permanently removing some children from their birth parents (and by reasons of 'association' often from their wider family) because they were deemed to be at 'at risk'.

The significant difference now is that UK policy makers, like their American counterparts who have been doing so for some years, are beginning to realise that although such placements often provide better 'outcomes' for children, they are seldom 'risk free' and therefore require careful systematic assessment of the risks involved. In short, what we have seen over the past 20 years is simply some 'new thinking' about the 'age old' concept of extended families caring for each other in times of crises.

From an 'independent social worker's' (I.S.W.) perspective, work within the field of identifying and assessing kinship placements offers unique opportunities. It allows the I.S.W. the professional autonomy to make use of their full range of professional social work skills, knowledge and experience, without being constrained by local authority inter-departmental boundaries and politicking which has been brought about by the creation of various specialist teams such as; family placement; assessment; family finding; care management; duty; etc.

Such professional autonomy however comes at a price. That price is reflected in the potential risk to your own professional integrity, personal values and business viability, if you should ever forget the considerable trust which commissioners place in your ability to maintain the highest possible professional and business standards when carrying out your work; failure to do so, not only compromises the child, but ultimately your own professional integrity and business viability. It goes without saying that alongside the 'trust' which a commissioner might place in you as an I.S.W. there is also a significant amount of 'responsibility'. 'Responsibility' which has to be continually prioritised, so that above all else your social work practice ensures that various regulatory codes of professional standards are adhered to at all times.

From a small business perspective, I'm sure my accountant despairs at the number of cases I close early because in my professional view, there is not sufficient prima facie evidence to justify the time (and cost) needed to convert into to a lengthy assessment!

Although this may sound fairly easy, the reality is that not only are there some professional tensions involved when working within the field of kinship placements (opposing legal, medical, educational and social work perspectives), there are also many organisational stresses and structural anomalies within local authorities and various court practices, which often reflect the complete opposite of 'joined up thinking' (Children's Rights Alliance 2005, Bullock 2005). An example of this would be, that when you need reasonable time to explore and consider potential family placements within the extended family network, you can simultaneously face constant and often unrealistic pressures to comply with both the prescribed timescales recommended by the Court Management Protocol (November 2003), and the principle of 'No Delay' enshrined in both the Children Act 1989 and Adoption and Children Act 2002.

In order to safely chart one's own professional navigation through the above guidance, procedure, protocol and legislation, and still keep the child and family centre stage, one has to have some key social work skills which have to be consistently demonstrated to ensure both your ongoing professional registration, via the General Social Care Council (G.S.C.C.), and reassure future clients.

A selection of these social work skills would be; having highly developed interpersonal skills, an empathy with often the most alienated service users; the ability to apply and justify a particular social work model and the theoretical base which underpins it; the ability to critically and sensitively evaluate various data; where necessary, a willingness to positively challenge the practice (or lack of it) of those who commission your services (recognising that at times this will clearly result in no further commissions from a particular source); and an ability to be very honest with both yourself and others about your own professional limitations.

In my experience one of the main benefits of being commissioned as an 'Independent' practitioner, when set against the significant personal risks associated with self employment, is the opportunity (and often an implicit expectation placed on you by others) to think outside the 'placement box'; to challenge the child's care plan; where appropriate, to confront other experts views; and still have the professional freedom to express your own professional opinion.

In a period where the authority and independence of many good children's guardians are coming under increasing control and pressure from CAFCASS to 'manage' ever increasing caseloads, and when many local authorities / courts are often searching for 'instant risk free' placements, the need for truly independent professional voices who are experienced enough, and as importantly, willing enough to promote the appropriate and safe use of kinship placements for children is greater now than ever before (Place; 2005).

Having highlighted some of the professional responsibilities involved, one cannot ignore the many professional benefits of working as an I.S.W. in this field. Not only do you get asked to work on many of the most intractable and complex cases involving multiple, wide ranging, and often historical social work issues, but also in doing so you get the opportunity to play a significant role in protecting children, empowering families, and raising the profile and importance of the many 'inspiring' kinship carers, without whom many 1000's of children 'in need' would still quite unnecessarily be placed with non-related / unknown carers.

With the unfolding 'Every Child Matters (2004)' agenda, the fusion of many previous social service and education departments into newly constituted 'Children's Trusts', the ongoing review of 'Legal Aid (2005)', and the increasing focus on 'Working Together (1999)', there has never been a more important time for practitioners to both contribute to the learning of others and have an influence on policy development.

As such, on a wider professional level, being an active member of the 'Independents Forum' (a B.A.S.W. Specialist Interest Group), I am able to express my own professional views as an I.S.W. both individually and collectively in a wide variety of national forums and consultative processes (D.F.E.S., D.O.H., G.S.C.C., L.C.D. etc), all of which positively contribute to the ever changing face of social work.

In conclusion, if you can live with the financial uncertainties of working independently (and my own experience is that most cannot), and are seriously committed to child centred re-unification of children within their extended families where it is safe to do so; if you have a broad knowledge base of various social work theory and models of practise; if you have extensive interpersonal skills and ability to work well with families and professionals alike; if you work to a very high standard and are highly motivated; if you understand, but do not limit your own professional sights by local and national regulation, policy and bureaucracy; if you have a commitment to the advancement of both your own and other's learning; if you are concerned that the role, scope and influence of guardians is reducing; if you question the suggested withdrawal of legal aid in some aspects of child care proceedings which would result in more fast tracked and unrepresented care proceedings, if you are not afraid of occasionally working in the eye of a storm, then working as an I.S.W. in the complex and exciting world of Kinship Care might just be for you!

References;

1. Broad / Skinner (2005). *Relative benefits; placing children in Kinship care.*
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2. Bullock (2005); *The Bigger Picture.*
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3. Children's Rights Alliance; (November 2005); *State of Children's Rights in England*
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4. DFES (2004). *Every Child Matters (Various)*
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5. DOH (1999). *Working Together to Safeguard Children.*
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6. Place (2005). *Is there a need for CAFCASS?*
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7. Sykes / Sinclair/Gibbs/ Wilson (2002). *Kinship V Stranger Foster Care.*
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Further Information

1. Various information and useful contacts for working with Grandparents; Grandparents Federation, The Stow, Harlow, Essex, CM20 3AG: 01279 428040.
2. Various information and useful contacts to work as an independent social worker; National Independent Social Workers Forum: IF C/O BASW 16 Kent Street, Birmingham B5 6RD. Tel 0121-753-2001.
3. For further information on children's rights; Children's Rights Alliance; 94 White Lion Street, London, N1 9PF. Tel 020 7278 8222.
4. For a collection of recent research into kinship care as a placement option see; Joan Hunt's (DOH researcher) Scooping Paper 2002.

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