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## Creative connections: Parenting capacity, reading with children and practitioners assessment and intervention

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**Title**

**Creative links: Parenting capacity, reading with children and practitioner assessment and intervention.**

**Key words: child and family support, parenting capacity, children's literature; social work assessment.**

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## **Creative links: Parenting capacity, reading with children and practitioner assessment and intervention.**

### **Abstract**

This paper presents some findings from a study of the views of 33 parents\* from a diversity of backgrounds with children between 0 and 12. Twenty two parents were using family support services. They were asked about their views on 'parenting capacity' based on the dimensions of *The Framework for the Assessment of Children in Need and their Families* (Department of Health et al 2000) which are now incorporated into the *Common Assessment Framework* used in Every Child Matters (DfES, 2004a, 2004b). They were also asked about reading with their children and how this enhanced their parenting capacities. Their responses were analysed using the parenting capacity dimensions of *The Framework for the Assessment of Children in Need and their Families*. It became apparent that this common activity (parent/child reading) contributed much to children's development and to the quality of the child/parent relationship. It also enhanced parenting capacity as described in the parenting capacity dimensions. This paper presents that part of the findings which illustrates the creative links that exist between the activity of parents and children reading together and the parenting capacity dimensions social workers use in assessment and intervention. These findings are relevant to practitioners working within current policy and practice agendas in children's services, which promote multidisciplinary working and non stigmatising assessments and interventions.

\* the word parent is used as a shorthand to include anyone in a parenting role with a child

### **Introduction.**

This paper contributes to the literature in social work about assessment and family support work with vulnerable children and their families. It focuses on the 'parenting capacity' dimensions of the *Framework for the Assessment of Children in Need and their Families* (DH et al. 2000) which dimensions remain relevant for assessments in the new structures for delivering children's services. The study draws together two strands of thinking to consider their usefulness, when combined, to vulnerable children, their parents (or carers), social work and other practitioners. It is suggested that the importance of parent/child reading, as understood by educators, can also be significant for be used social work practice when assessing parenting capacity.

Before undertaking the study a strand of literature was explored that conceptualised the skills and qualities required to be someone who can meet a child's developmental needs,

summarised by the term ‘parenting capacity’. This included psychological and social work literature commonly used to underpin assessment and intervention. The second strand of ideas considered was the psychological and educational literature which explores the contribution of reading children’s books to child development and wellbeing and the benefits reading together offers parent (carer) and child. Both strands of thinking draw from an established source of psychological research and literature about the developmental needs of children and the abilities needed to raise them. Contemporary research and scholarship which seeks to understand the relevance of this heritage in contemporary cultural contexts (e.g. Aldgate et al 2006) was also considered. The relevance of the ideas in contemporary contexts, was tested by exploring and analysing the views of 33 parents on both strands . These were all people raising children at the time of the interviews.

The parents’ views on both what makes for a good parent and the benefits of reading with children were gathered and analysed within the parenting capacity dimensions of *The Framework for the Assessment of Children in Need and their Families* (2000). The use of this framework which draws mainly from one of the strands of literature (psychological and social work) means that the second strand of thinking (psychological and education) could be linked to the framework and relevant connections and comparisons made, in order to enhance the understanding of ‘parenting capacity’ contained there. The primary aim of the study was to consider the relationship between parenting capacity and the dimensions of the assessment framework with parents who were bringing up children between 0 and 12 years old.

Theorists about children’s literature (Tucker 1981, 2000; Applebee, 1985; Hunt, 1990; Bearne and Watson, 2000; Meek, 2000; Zipes 2000, 2001) suggest that the ordinary and enjoyable activity of reading children’s books will:

- Foster the child’s social, psychological, moral and spiritual development.
- Enhance the relationship between parent and child.
- Develop imagination, empathy and windows to new experiences for child and parent.
- Create the capacity to engage with a range of literacies, print, ICT, emotional and social literacy.

The study therefore explored these assumptions and linked them, together with the parents’ views on parenting capacity, to assessment and practitioner involvement in the lives of vulnerable children and their families. This paper, therefore, presents connections that were made and discusses some implications for practitioners who both assess and intervene in the

lives of children and parents. The study produced other findings relating to: the parents identification with the parenting capacity dimensions and their level of agreement with them (which was high and showed a holistic understanding of children's needs); the relationship between social work and literature; the importance of family and environmental factors in children's lives; the impact on parenting styles of parents' own family histories. These are discussed elsewhere (Seden, 2006). The focus here is the contribution of parental reading with children to parenting capacity and practitioner intervention.

### **The Framework for the Assessment of Children in Need and their Families and the Common Assessment Framework**

*The Framework for the Assessment of Children in Need and their Families* (DH et al. 2000) replaced the 'Orange Book,' *Protecting Children: a Guide for Social Workers Undertaking a Comprehensive Assessment* (Department of Health 1988), written before the Children Act 1989, with a narrower focus to childhood difficulties, parents individual deficits and in depth family histories. The new publication, underpinned by research findings, suggested a more inclusive approach was needed. *Child Protection Messages from Research* (Department of Health 1995) was particularly influential in showing the extent to which a narrow instrumental approach to families based on slender or narrowly focused assessment (with or without intervention) was resulting in poor outcomes in terms of service provision to enhance children's lives. It was supported by other publications which included materials directly relevant to assessing individual children, parental capacity, and community resources (Jack and Jordan 1999; Department of Health 2000; Horwath 2001; Ward and Rose 2002; Jack and Gill 2003; Aldgate et al. 2006).

Since then, the organisational arrangements for providing services to children and their families have changed with the introduction of Children's Trusts and Local Safeguarding Children Boards under the Children Act 2004. Government intentions were laid out in the Green Paper, *Every Child Matters*' (DfES 2003a, b), *Every Child Matters: next steps* (DfES 2004a) and *Every Child Matters: Change for Children* (DfES 2004b). The Common Assessment Framework (DfES 2005) was developed to focus on a broader group of children who have additional needs and require early intervention. A common assessment will trigger further assessments where needed and *The Framework for the Assessment of Children in Need and their Families* may be used for the assessment of children in need and care leavers. Its philosophy remains the underpinning one for the Integrated Children's System, implemented in August 2006. The parenting capacity dimensions, as discussed here, are retained within the Common Assessment Framework. The consideration of some key aspects

of parenting capacity and parental reading with children is capable of enhancing both frameworks.

Social workers and other practitioners continue to assess families, using an ecological model, in relation to three key dimensions:

- the developmental needs of individual children;
- the capacity of the parents to meet the child's needs;
- the family and environmental situation in which the family live.

The dimensions relating to parenting capacity are: Basic care, Ensuring Safety, Emotional warmth, Stimulation, Guidance and Boundaries, Stability. Parenting capacity is also assumed to be affected by child, family and environmental factors, as ecological models of understanding the child, the family and their community suggest (DH et al. 2000, Jack 2002). Before describing the research and discussing the outcomes, a definition of how parenting capacity was further understood for the study follows.

### **Defining parenting capacity**

For the purposes of the study parenting capacity was understood in two ways. First parenting can be described as:

*The performance of all the actions necessary to promote and support the physical, emotional, social and intellectual development of a child from infancy to adulthood (Jackson 2000: 245).*

Additionally, Donald and Jureidini's conceptualisation was also used. They suggest that parenting capacity is best defined not as a list of concrete issues or functional dimensions but rather as:

*the parents' ability to empathically understand and give priority to their children's needs*

*(Donald and Jureidini 2004: abstract)*

This makes central the parents' ability to understand and respond sensitively to the challenges which their particular child's temperament and development pose. This includes the impact of adverse experiences such as abuse or loss. It also includes the parents' capacity to:

*handle their own intrinsic characteristics which might impede their parenting capacity.*

*(Donald and Jureidini 2004: abstract)*

Thus, parenting capacity involves both the functional aspects needed to ensure that children are fed, clothed and kept safe and also the ability to respond with empathy and sensitivity to each individual child's particular developmental needs. This requires great flexibility from parents, as no two children are the same and many have special needs because of disability or ability that is exceptional and unique to them (Marchant 2001). Children growing up in the same families and environments are each unique and have different needs which require the parental responses best suited to stimulate and further their development and wellbeing (Mussen et al. 1990; Rutter et al. 1994; Rutter and Hay 1994; Bee 1995; Aldgate et al. 2006).

### **The relevance of parental reading with children**

Reading with a child is an ordinary activity and yet children's books offer new and different ways of knowing about both every day events and imaginative worlds, providing the opportunity to experience life from other perspectives (Tucker 1981, 2000; Spufford 2002; Hendy 1994). They offer opportunities to empathise with others and ideas for aspiration.

*Stories are like doors and windows; you can enter places and leave by them,  
hide behind them and see through them*

*(Hendy in Bearne et al: 106)*

Stories can stimulate the imagination but are also a useful prompt for direct and indirect communication on a range of issues (starting school; being adopted; moving home; understanding death). The small book, which can be carried about, the pages turned and re-turned, pored over and shared together with a child at home, at bedtime, in cars, in the park, on a bus, offers a different and more intimate experience than television and other media, which keeps it central to many special times of children's and parents' lives, such as bed-time and holidays.

Sharing a book with a child is a pleasurable experience and the literature in education and psychology illuminates how books are both a 'mirror to nature' and a way of adults and children exploring together the links between their own 'outer' and 'inner worlds' (Bettleheim 1991; Rustin and Rustin 2001, 2002). This power is recognised in educational settings and the enhancement of children's literacy has been a preoccupation of the New Labour Governments since the mid 1990s (refs). Linked to this, for social workers, could be a

consideration of the way literacy might improve a child's opportunities and life chances, especially when starting out from some disadvantage and/or vulnerability.

It can be argued that the climate for children's services in the early part of the twenty-first century has been target driven and performance managed (refs) which does not necessarily help practitioners to be creative and imaginative in their relationships with families, despite what families say they want from practitioners and despite the introduction of a broader based set of desired outcomes for children within the Every Child Matters paradigm. Parents remain concerned about losing control and being stigmatised by their involvement with child welfare agencies (Department of Health 2000: 12).

Research studies over time indicate what people value from services and professionals. For example, Aldgate and Statham (Department of Health 2001, p. 95), summarise findings on children's views from a group of research studies and identify that they value reliability, practical help, support, time to listen and respond and their lives being seen in the round. Aldgate and Statham also note the successful features of partnership with parents (2001, p. 67). The need for a creative relationship remains the case even when working with child protection issues and risks of harm (Thoburn et al. 1995). Other studies continue have to confirm such findings (Prior et al. 1999).

Assessments leading to better outcomes also depend on the professionals' capacity to involve parents and children in direct work (Aldgate and Simmonds 1988; Crompton 1990; Hindle 2001; Jones 2001, 2003; NSPCC et al. 1997; Aldgate and Seden 2006). Books can be part of this and yet social work literature on parenting and parenting capacity, unlike the literature in education, pays scant attention to the usefulness of books for children and their families or to the ways social workers and other practitioners can capitalise on this as a way of seeing children's lives 'in the round'. Therefore the study explored what a group of parents think reading contributes to their parenting capacity, and then considered how practitioner interaction with families might be enhanced by engaging with this and the implications for working together in the new organisational frameworks (Department of Health, 2006).

### **The study**

The study was designed to test a number of research questions, including:

- What does sharing books with a child contribute to the capacity to parent as represented by parenting capacity dimensions?



- Should this be important to social workers and other practitioners when assessing and intervening ?

Two purposive samples of parents were recruited for the study. There were 33 parents. Some parents (11) were bringing up children without using family support services and were interviewed at home. Another group (22) were recruited through family support projects which they attended for a variety of reasons. None were currently involved in child protection or other statutory social work intervention at the time of the interview. All were made aware of the purposes of the research, including publication of the outcomes anonymously and all the participants signed consent forms. The criteria for inclusion were current parenting experience of children between 0 and 12 and experience of reading with the children.

All the parents were interviewed using a single instrument divided into 4 sections. The interviews were semi-structured. Two sections asked closed questions, first to ascertain demographic data and second to survey the parents' views on parenting capacity – using the dimensions of the Assessment Framework. Two further sections asked open questions about parenting, reading with children and the parents were asked to respond to some case study material (pictures from a children's book of domestic scenes).

A qualitative approach was taken to analysing the data as this remains the best vehicle for demonstrating the effects on people's lives of social policies and practices and for gathering people's perspectives (Finch 1989, 1991) and followed an established route taken in children and families research in recent years (Hardiker and Barker 1994, Cleaver and Freeman 1995; Prior et al. 1999) where the information gathered by interview from purposive samples is analysed thematically. Using the parenting capacity dimensions for analysis provided a reference point against which to compare the main trends. The sample was too small to be statistically significant but contained a range of parents, from different social economic groups and educational backgrounds For example, as their highest educational achievement, 7 had degrees, 6 had A levels, 8 had GCSE or the equivalent and 4 had left school with no qualifications and 8 didn't comment. Two parents could not yet read.

The parents own identification of ethnic origin was described as English/Iranian (1), Japanese (1); Black British (1); Mixed Race (1), Scottish (1) Asian /Hindu (1) white / British or English (21) and 8 didn't comment. There were 19 parents who had an income from their own and/or partners work (although there was a wide range of income levels within that) and 9 parents lived solely on benefits, 5 didn't comment. Three parents are fathers, but the majority of the sample are mothers. There were times when contextual data became relevant to the analysis.

For example the parents from the most economically disadvantaged communities were the most concerned about ensuring safety outside the home.

### **The range of findings**

The analysis of the data yielded findings in relation to parents' views of the parenting capacity dimensions, their own views on parenting, the extent to which they read with children, the books they enjoyed or did not enjoy. In this paper only those findings which relate the parents views on the perceived benefits of reading with children relating to the Assessment Framework are discussed. This can only be in summary form with some exemplars of the main points highlighted. All the data from interviews is analysed under the headings: Basic Care, Ensuring Safety, Emotional Warmth, Stimulation, Guidance and Boundaries, Stability. The linking of the headings follows the thematic analysis of the main trends in the data recorded from the parents.

### **Creative links**

This section selects some of the key themes reported by parents in response to the open ended questions about reading and parenting capacity and on occasions, considers their response to looking at some pictures from two children's books (Hughes 1997, 2001). All the parents were already reading with their children and identified many favourites. They were also finding them from varied sources: shops, libraries, book clubs, charity shops, internet shopping, family centres, schools and play groups (Seden 2006).

The parents described how they and their children benefited from reading together and how books were embedded in their parenting activities. All parents enjoyed books and wanted to pass on a love of reading for pleasure, fun and educational value. This was true of the parents irrespective of background or their own literacy. For example, those who could not read well themselves still looked at books with their children. One parent told stories from picture books and her children read school reading books to her.

Say something about range in the sample ...

From the data it emerged that in relation to 3 dimensions emotional warmth, basic care and stability the process of reading was important. In relation to guidance and boundaries, ensuring safety and stimulation the book content became more significant. The dimensions are now therefore discussed for this paper under these two grouped headings, outlining some main points.

### **Emotional warmth, basic care, stability.**

Reading with children was viewed by every parent as a good way to be together and closely linked to a quality of closeness in basic care at bed time and bath time. The majority of parents (31) said that closeness could be created and maintained that way. This was felt to create a sense of stability for the child. Reading was linked to:

- Love time and cuddles
- Quality and relaxing time
- Bonding and emotional closeness
- Comfort, familiarity, fun
- Bedtime

This was summed up by a parent who said ‘*you can get joy out of it, in their eyes, it is closeness, contact and togetherness*’. Parents used books to calm children down, debrief on the day, and to bring a quality of close and special experience between child and parent. It was particularly important for 3 parents with three or four children who said that reading enabled them to have a quiet group activity with their children together, or could provide for some one to one time. Throughout the study, time after time, parents expressed the importance of reading together with children to build a warm and caring relationship, and the pleasure was never far away, for example:

*It makes you feel very special if someone reads to you...you can enjoy being read to more than television...it gives you opportunities to talk if you don't understand and pleasure*

*I think one of the lovely things is having a child snuggle down your lap reading something*

*It's the bond, that 5 minutes for you and them...this is their loving and special time*

Without using the word attachment, the parents were describing an activity which promoted secure attachment, emotional closeness and empathic responsiveness in their families. This was particular the case with younger children, although parents who also had children who could read alone, thought that continuing to share a reading time and to talk about books remained important.

### **Guidance and boundaries, ensuring safety, stimulation**

The parents thought that education and stimulation went hand in hand and linked reading and learning. There were three strands to this:

- Helping small children to enjoy books.
- Helping children to learn to read.
- Encouraging reading as a way of learning about other experiences.

Children's books were seen as useful for guiding children and explaining new experiences. There were 22 parents who could identify at least one book they had utilised in this way. The other 11 parents were equally open to this as a useful idea. Three of the parents said it was difficult to find helpful books. However, the areas where parents had already used books to guide children about new experiences included : shyness, bullying, sexual development, cultural matters, babies being born, hospital visits, loss, bereavement, starting school, siblings, being a bridesmaid, pets, separation and divorce, being lost and adoption. One parent went to the library to explain her son's schoolmates' backgrounds to him:

*He knows all about black and white children because I've got a black friend. He's only 5 and he's into asking. I haven't got any Pakistani and Chinese friends, so I got a book about it'*

While parents often specifically sought books that they considered stimulating, the majority thought that too often children's books present families in stereotypical ways. Four parents, who lived in communities where there were hazards (e.g. heavy road traffic, debris from drug use in local parks) wanted books about wider experiences and lifestyles and the risks and dangers to children from wandering in the street. Several parents commented on the lack of Black and Asian families in children's books. Parents often criticised books for being stylised and not in tune with real life:

*you definitely always have a two parent family with grandparents around*

*you never see a haggard mum*

*there is a total absence of Asian parents in books*

There are books emerging that tackle social issues, especially for older children. However, you have to search for books showing Black and Asian families in ordinary parenting contexts. Internet shopping provided access to a wider range of children's books than high street shopping. Jacqueline Wilson (1998, 1999) and Janet and Alan Ahlberg (2001) were

popular with parents for not being as gender stereotypical and more multicultural and contemporary than others. In general, fathers seem to be seen washing cars and going to work, occasionally doing a little housework. Several parents commented that they and their partners shared tasks equally. One father who was bringing up a child alone in difficult circumstances had found a role model in a book given to him by a friend, Roald Dahl's (2001) *Danny, Champion of the World*, where the father is presented in a positive and enabling way. Grandparents remain 'old' and 'stereotypically grey' in many books, whereas parents described their children's grandparents as being young and smartly dressed. One child's favourite book had a granny with a red sports car – like his granny.

Parents used story books to stimulate their children's imagination, escape and laugh together. On the whole, however, parents did not overly identify with parents in children's books, although some of Shirley Hughes' (Hughes, 1997,2001) illustrations did connect. However, in children's books parents are often not present when children are playing something these parents saw as neglectful.. Of the 33 parents, 31 in some way described parenting capacity where reading is embedded into family life, important and meaningful. A parent living in disadvantaged circumstances said:

*It might not be every night but I do try and read every day. We don't live in an ideal world and there are times when life is going to be difficult, but as long as you communicate with a child and can explain it in words they can understand and show them books to suit their ability*

Thus, it can only be concluded that a child whose family are not engaging in this kind of parent/child reading, has carers who are neglecting an experience familiar and beneficial to many. In summary the main points from this group of parents were that:

- Reading with a child is an integral part of parenting capacity.
- Parents use books to discuss experiences with younger children.
- Books provide opportunities to discuss wider issues with younger and older children, but it can be difficult to find suitable books.
- Children and parents read books together because parents see it as useful educationally.
- Emotional warmth, basic care, security and stability are closely linked to the pleasure of reading with a parent, whatever the book.
- Guidance, stimulation and safety issues are more enhanced if the content of the book is fit for purpose.

- Children from homes where literacy is low are going to be disadvantaged in a range of ways not just educationally.
- Role models for parents in book are few; too often parents are portrayed stereotypically and nostalgically.

The analysis of the parents' views led to the unsurprising conclusion that parent child reading is very important in all kinds of ways social, emotional, psychological and educational, and leads therefore to some thinking about how practitioners might be working with this, and how a consideration of the fun and emotional closeness of reading might be part of what practitioner's consider when assessing parent child relationships.

Those parents who are not reading with their children may need encouragement. Many of those who rely on books from their own childhoods need some guidance if they are to find the wider range of books – as they would like. For example, the books that parents mentioned were often those they had read in their own childhood. Parents using family support services were reading a wider range of books , but many were not finding the newer titles and wider range of children's books that are becoming available. For vulnerable children and their families, support for this pleasurable activity is more important because of the disadvantage that they will accrue in the quality of the parenting that they experience if parents are not supported in this area. They are also more likely to be socially excluded from other literacies, for example, electronic communication. Reading together per se will strengthen parenting capacity in emotional warmth, stability and security for children. Other reading, if the content is relevant to a parent and child , will enhance guidance and boundaries, ensuring safety and stimulation. Finally, there was some evidence that reading with a child can also enhance parenting capacities, especially attachment, empathy and the capacity to engage with and discuss a wide range of experiences and topics.

Critically, reading is an activity where children and a parent interact. Such interaction is essential for language relationship development and the way the child constructs personal meaning. Rowe (1988: 48-9) writes:

*It seems then that the structure by which a person organizes his world originates in the baby's interaction not just with his physical world but, more importantly in his interaction with other people...The interaction of human beings with one another seems to be more than just a pleasurable or useful activity. It seems to be a necessary condition of life, as necessary a eating or breathing.*

### **An unexpected outcome**

As well as answering questions on reading, books and parenting, the parents were asked to respond to some illustrations taken from two of Shirley Hughes picture books, *The Nursery Collection* (1997) and *Things I Like* (2001). These books show domestic scenes, bath time, bed time, children playing and so on. The parents' response to these pictures produced a different range of comments around parenting capacity (Seden 2006), particularly basic care, emotional warmth and ensuring safety. The pictures of children playing in the park with little supervision produced several comments of which this parent is representative:

*Yes, I mean society these days isn't safe like it was in that era, when you could let a child wander around a bit; I certainly wouldn't let my child wander out of my sight.*

There was a high level of concern about stranger danger and the possibilities of children 'wandering off'. The parents also commented on assumptions about mothers staying at home, the stereotypical portrayal of grandparents, lack of multicultural representation and gender roles. Although, within that, there could be contrasting views, for example:

*I like the picture of dad doing the bath that's a good thing*

Compared with

*I wouldn't feel comfortable with a man bathing the children*

or

*There are lots of animals that's nice, we are a family that enjoys animals*

Compared with

*That poor old dog looks neglected. I couldn't have a dog that was wild with kids. The dog knows where it stands and I know where I stand with the dog.*

Whatever the picture shown, the views of the parents were drawn out by them. On occasions where parents, interviewed, in a group looked at books together, there was some debate about perspectives. I also found that 4 parents, from the sample, who had said little in response to open ended questions, were able to talk much more freely about what they thought about parenting and their own practice from what they saw in pictures:

*That reminds me of bath time. I put them both in together now, they share everything. They are both boys, there's fourteen months between them and they have the same personalities and love a bath'*

This particular parent said much in detail about her children and their daily routines and her wider family in response to this activity, where her earlier answers to questions had been brief. Looking at pictures with parents proved a real opportunity to talk, both about practical and emotional issues. Therefore, just as children's books provide a vehicle for children and adults to talk, they also have the capacity to open up conversation between two adults. The pictures also produced reactions because there were many of parents carrying out domestic tasks. Looking at pictures with parents raised a richer discussion about safety in the home than asking questions.

Faced with visual images, several parents said more as the pictures sparked ideas, likes and dislikes and their reminiscences about their own childhoods compared with what they experienced with their children. This has implications for the kind of work that practitioners might undertake when working with families, or with parents in groups around parenting skills. This perhaps leads to a need for some creative thinking about books as a means of working with families. This kind of method might be natural, less stigmatising and more creative than relying on interviewing without visual aids. This is discussed further next.

#### **Children's books as a method of social work intervention.**

Direct work with children, including the use of story, has always been part of social work practice (Aldgate and Simmonds 1988, Crompton 1990, Aldgate and Seden 2006). It helps children to make sense of events and relationships that affect them so that their emotional and social development continue as well as possible. Sometimes specialised therapeutic intervention is needed. Oaklander says (1978, p. 193):

*It's up to me to provide the means by which we will open doors and windows to their inner worlds. I need to provide methods for children to express their feelings, to get what they are keeping guarded inside out into the open. so that together we can deal with the material.*

There is a particular place for specialised therapeutic work with children who have had the most damaging experiences (Aldgate and Simmonds 1992, Aldgate and Seden 2006) which is best undertaken by a child psychiatrist, clinical psychologist or counsellor. Sometimes a therapeutic community is the best option, either short or longer term. Practitioners in fostering or adoption often undertake direct work using books specially written to help them to talk with children (Foxon, 2001, 2002, 2003, 2005). However, the use of books with parents and children is not just for therapists and therapy. Family support and safeguarding is also about helping children to handle their feelings about transition and change as they go along,



preventing the build up of damaging unexpressed feelings. Creative practitioners, parents and substitute carers can do this, as understanding the impact of life events on children and helping them to handle them, is part of their role in safeguarding and promoting children's welfare.

The parents in this study were very willing to engage in talking about reading and look at picture books. Their responses illustrate the potential for using books, consistently and in a mainstream way, when practitioners discuss parenting with families. This could be part of assessments and interventions for family support or safeguarding. There are a whole range of books that any child care practitioner could use to talk with parents and children and to build their relationships with children. For example, some older children might find Jacqueline Wilson's books helpful. Other books can be found to support children through common experiences such as starting school or the birth of a sibling or experiences of loss and death. Using the kinds of books that many children are reading anyway makes this approach less stigmatising and means that the discussion might be indirect and safer, paving the way perhaps for children to trust the practitioner with more direct communication. Just sharing a book and having fun with a child might make the relationship between the child and that practitioner useful to the child.

However, the study showed that it is not just practitioners who can work with children through reading with them. Ordinary parents in this research 'help' their children to handle their emotions and the world through books all the time. Practitioners can encourage and support parents to build their relationships with their children in this way, especially when things have gone wrong. For example, contact visits can be difficult when parents have not seen their children for a while and feelings can run high. Often parents are insecure about how to approach their child. In this situation the use of books the child enjoys can be really useful, especially if the parent understands that reading with the child will rebuild relatedness, can be fun, and might open up the channels of ordinary conversation again.

The literature reviewed' together with the views of the parents, in this study, suggest that the case for the value of reading between parent and child, in developing the whole child is overwhelming, as is the case for parental involvement in social work interventions, undertaken as far as possible in partnership. While basic literacy (learning to read and write) has been seen as a preoccupation of education, when working together teachers and social workers have common cause in working for the benefits that involving children and parents in reading together brings, especially when working with the most vulnerable children and their families. Reading with children and the benefits that come from this is linked to the

relationship between parent and child and can be viewed as an integral part of parenting capacity. It would enhance any assessment or intervention to take account of this and the role of books in developing parental empathy. Social work has tended to see reading and parenting as the province of education, however this simple split cannot be made. Learning to read might be the province of schools, parents and children, but the pleasure and benefits of shared reading and the link between literacy and social inclusion and optimising children's life chances belong to an understanding of good parenting across disciplines.

In a literate society, if this part of a child or parent's life is impoverished this compounds any other disadvantage. In the study, some parents were aware of the disadvantage of not reading themselves and the impact this had on their children. There is no reason why parent and child can't learn to read together, or why educators and social care practitioners can't work together to bring this kind of this kind of enrichment which may be quite critical for the children, and parents and for their relationships with peers and school communities. Although television may be a leveller when it comes to developing literacy, if this sample of 33 'ordinary parents' are reasonably typical, books still have a special place in parents and children's lives irrespective of time spent with other media.

Therefore books and reading with children could be used far more creatively within interventions in their lives and have the benefit of being 'normal activities' which build parents' relationships with their own children, schools, family support projects, libraries, other community groups and enhance inclusion and a sense of belonging. It is also possible that building parents' confidence in this area, which is a relatively safe thing to do, if starting with picture books and talking about them, can increase their self esteem more generally, provided the books chosen don't perpetuate a sense of disadvantage. Work done in this way can build the aspects of parenting capacity assessed, using frameworks in a less instrumental way to meet the needs of children for basic care, emotional warmth, guidance and boundaries, safety, stimulation and stability.

### **Seeing the whole child**

It was clear from talking to these parents that they had the capacity to see children in holistic ways and would therefore be surprised to find practitioners unable to be the same. For practitioners concern to see children 'holistically' encompasses a concern to consider all aspects of a child's growth to maturity as well as the context of carers and wider environment in which that occurs. Assessment frameworks remain a conceptual tool for organising their thinking. Bringing in children's literature is to introduce another ways of knowing which help parents self reflect and draw closer to their children. The potential is there to assist

assessments, discussions and groups as a way of respectful encounter with therapeutic effect. Social workers can also see people in the round, ‘think out of the box’, and find solutions together with children and their parents, building health and capacity, in the contexts of their communities, using non stigmatising ways of engaging.

### **Old wine in new bottles**

As the research was conducted, shifts in emphasis in policy for children and their families were underway. However the factors that contribute to a warm and caring childhood with strong attachments to parents and carers, including the ordinary activity of story telling and parent and child reading together endure across the generations and across cultures. The study originated when the policy emphasis, led by research (Department of Health 1995), had moved away from the protection paradigm and the associated targeted interventions and child rescue approach of the 1980s towards increased family support, earlier intervention, and a more holistic paradigm which predominated in the late 1990s. This was described as refocusing services away from narrow child protection towards meeting children’s developmental needs in partnership with their family carers. *The Assessment Framework for Children in Need and their Families*, developed within this holistic paradigm, used to analyse the data in the thesis, encapsulated developmental understandings, produced over time, about the needs of children and their families in their social environments.

By 2006, early criticisms that the Assessment Framework might be formulaic (Garrett 2003) were being moderated by the findings of studies showing practitioners creatively using the tool in with families (Horwath 2002; Joyce, 2003; Cleaver and Nicholson 2003; Cleaver et al. 2004; Holland 2004; Platt 2006). However, in the meantime, the death of Victoria Climbié in 2000, and the subsequent inquiry report (Cm5730, 2003) became the rationale for the introduction of a new government policy initiative, Every Child Matters. A spate of papers emerged from the Department for Education and Skills (DfES 2003a, 2003b, 2004a, 2004b) the department designated to oversee all children’s services. The Children Act 2004 introduced children’s services authorities aimed at achieving integration through the creation of strategic partnerships. Also in section 11 it reaffirmed interagency collaboration for children in need under the 1989 Children Act, placing a duty on agencies to work together to safeguard children.

Further legislation has followed. The Children Care Act 2006 aims to ‘transform’ early years provision. Proposals for the Children Bill 2008 further set the scene for a child care policy strategy that aims to support children from their early years through to adulthood. The

government's ten year plan envisages an interdisciplinary approach to child well-being, led by education as much as social workers or health, with the expectation that local authorities create children's trusts and children's centres. The whole approach is heavily outcomes focused. Other developments such as the revised Working Together (DfES, 2006) and the Integrated Children's System reinforce the drive towards good interdisciplinary action and information sharing in child protection cases. The recent appointment of a children's commissioner might also mean that children's voices are better heard.

Arguably, policy paradigms are fickle creations, driven as much by a particular government's need to be seen to do something after a particular scandal or crisis as by careful thinking about the needs of children and their families. Sometimes, political ideology appears to drive one aspect at the expense of others. However, to some extent the connection between the outcomes of the report into the death of Victoria Climbié and the breadth of recent policy change, may be seen as coincidental. New Labour's modernisation agenda and broad approach to children's services was already in train before the inquiry reported and is the main driver for change. It is worth noting that many of the key messages of the Climbié inquiry, repeat those of many other such reports about, listening to children, communication failings, good relationship skills and especially the need to further develop the skills of the child care workforce, as much as the need for a new policy direction. There will continue to be a need for creative practice that builds relationships with parents, carers and especially children and young people as described here. Best practice crosses and transcends shifting policy.

Parental capacity, and supporting it, is a necessary part of any child care policy, and has been a particular practice focus over the years in family and parent centres, such as those who took part in this study and those discussed by Tunstall et al. (2006). It will be important in this new policy environment to build on the legacy of past effective practice in supporting children and families. Parent and child reading together is part of this legacy. The broad aims of the Every Child matters paradigm are such that it is not difficult to argue the case for a continued scrutiny of the place of reading and literature in relation to children, parenting and other areas of children's services. Such activity can always enhance parent child relationship and the use of reading with children would also mitigate the narrowness of some of the targeted outcomes framework.

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