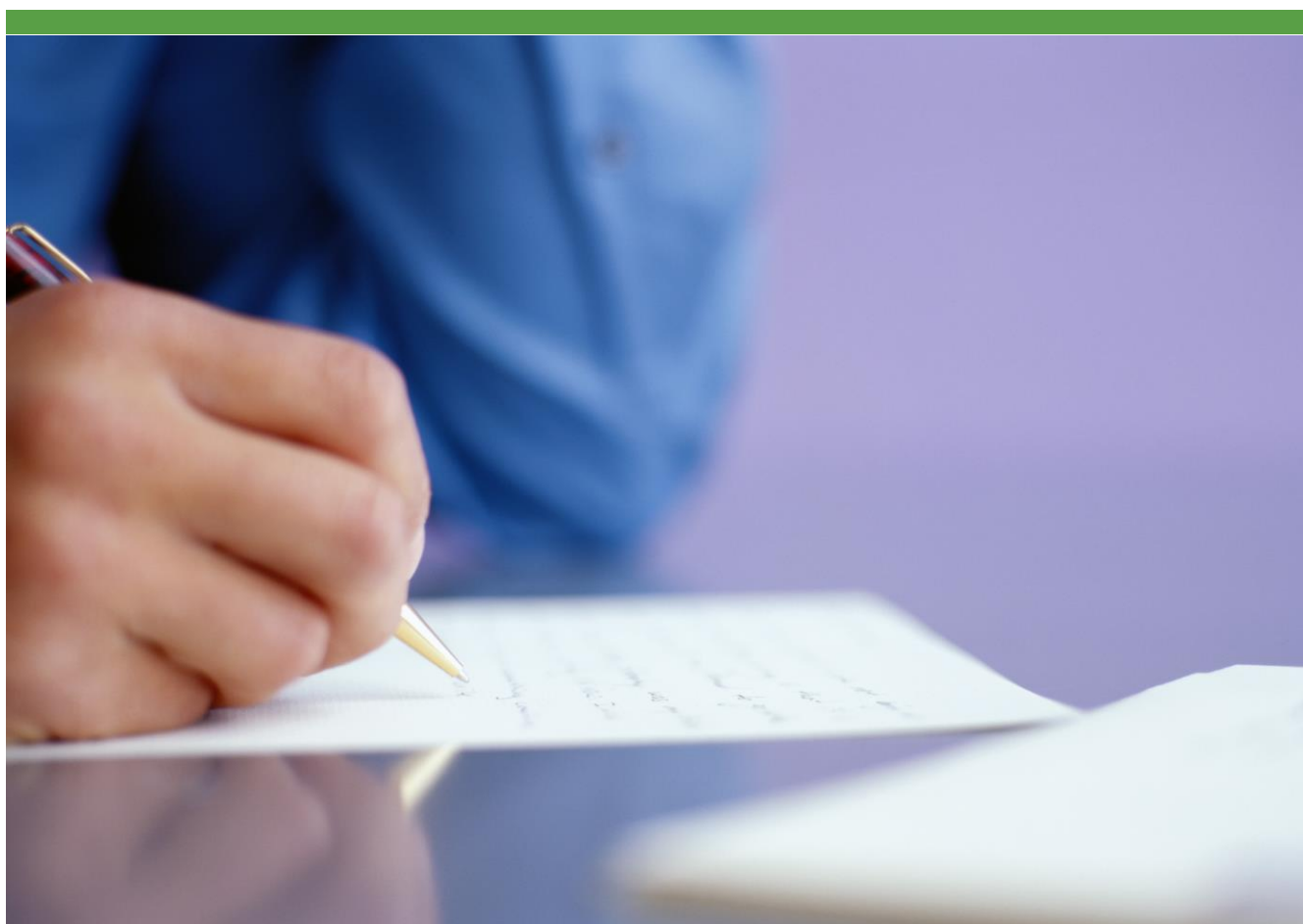


# Family Support Approach Specialist Services



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# Children and Families

## The Family Support Approach

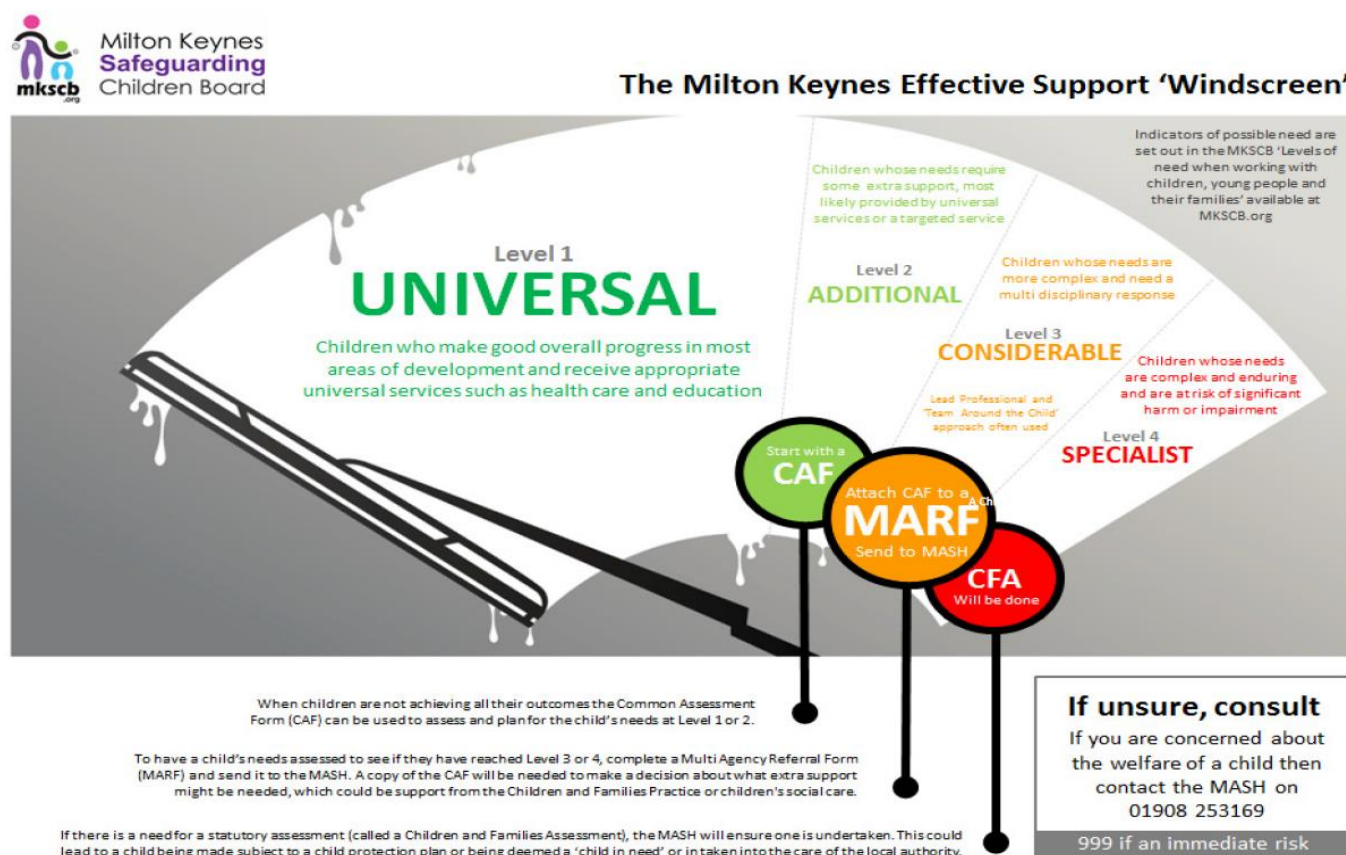
### 1. Introduction

This Family Support Approach sets out the approach taken by Milton Keynes Council Children’s Social Care, in partnership with other agencies, to ensure that children and young people in Milton Keynes are brought up in safe and secure settings and in ways that give them the best opportunities to thrive and prosper.

This approach sits as agreed policy of Milton Keynes Council and endorsed by Milton Keynes Safeguarding Children Board (MKSCB), setting out how we respond to the needs of children and families where there are significant safeguarding concerns.

In Milton Keynes we work to a model of intervention that sets out four levels of need; see figure 1 below. The Family Support approach is for those children and families with complex needs who fall into the ‘specialist’ end of the windscreen and particularly children who need intervention from Children’s Social Care. Milton Keynes Council has in place three Children and Families Practices who work with families with ‘additional’ and ‘considerable’ needs using the Milton Keynes Family Assessment (CAF). The Milton Keynes Safeguarding Children Board document, Levels of Need when working with Children, Young People and their Families in Milton Keynes<sup>(1)</sup>, provides guidance to professionals in assessing risk and need to ensure that children get the right response from the right service at the right time.

**Figure 1: The Milton Keynes Effective Support Windscreen**



Our Family Support Approach has been written to help social work staff, Children's Social Care managers and staff in partner services and agencies adhere to our expected standards. The document also seeks to explain these standards and how we seek to measure them. Our main objectives are ensuring we deliver the highest standards of service and promote the best possible outcomes for children, young people and their families.

Our practice ethos is built on the Signs of Safety model (Turnell & Edwards, 1999)<sup>(5)</sup> which promotes partnership working with children and their families. We help families find solutions to their own problems and seek their involvement at every step along the way. We ensure children's needs are paramount through the careful implementation and review of safety plans.

It is important that families, staff and partners fully understand and endorse our approach to family support. This requires us to articulate the approach clearly, demonstrating it is safe and effective, up-to-date and fit for purpose.

The Signs of Safety model relates to the principles of the 'Think Family Approach'<sup>(2)</sup> which states there is 'no wrong door' for a family to gain appropriate support. The approach uses systemic and problem solving approaches placing the child's needs at the centre of all the decision making processes.

Against a backdrop of rising prosperity and improved outcomes for the majority of families, there is a small minority of around 2% of families who experience multiple problems. Growing up in a family with multiple problems puts children at a higher risk of adverse outcomes. These families with multiple problems can exert a heavy cost upon public services as well as the wider community. If we are to reach out to families at risk we need to identify and make use of opportunities to build tailored, flexible and holistic services that work with the whole family and can turn lives around dramatically. The 'Troubled Families' initiative (Casey, 2012)<sup>(6)</sup> has helped us to further develop our specialist family support services. We have been able to pool our specialist resources to support some of our more problematic families in Milton Keynes where a number of different agencies might be involved.

## **2. Principles**

In all our activities with children and their families, the child's welfare is of paramount concern. Children are entitled to protection from significant harm through abuse, neglect or exploitation. All situations where child abuse is suspected or alleged is investigated and assessed thoroughly without delay. Where assessment indicates a child may be suffering significant harm, effective family support plans or child protection plans are developed and implemented to safeguard the child.

There are unique advantages for children experiencing family life in their own birth family and in most circumstances children's needs are best met by being cared for within their immediate or extended families. The Signs of Safety model emphasises this philosophy and seeks to build on the strengths inherent in every family. Children are always supported within their own family, with the assistance of family support services when necessary, unless there are clear reasons why this might not be consistent with their safety and wellbeing.

Children and families social care practice is about enabling positive change in families and communities promoting the best possible outcomes for children and young people. Practitioners therefore, need to deploy a range of methodologies to help people in a system (such as a family) find effective ways of solving identified problems, and thereby improving their lives. This ethos is reflected throughout our services and staff receive ongoing training and support to ensure their knowledge and skills are kept up to date.

The development of a working partnership with parents is usually the most effective route to meeting children's needs and maximising participation is encouraged whenever possible. This includes working honestly and openly with families and children. Services acknowledge and respect the contribution of parents, carers and other family members. We seek to involve them at the outset of our involvement enabling them to engage in decisions about their children and recognise when they need support. We acknowledge parents and carers strengths and creative potential to develop solutions to the problems they face. Sometimes, services seem to 'encircle' families and subject them to successive assessments and 'signposting' processes. The key is understanding the family's situation from their perspective and coordinating support to help them meet their children's needs more effectively. We also provide parents access to therapeutic support, which aims to unlock barriers in becoming an effective parent.

In Milton Keynes we have a rich diversity of cultural differences. In our work with children we protect and promote their cultural inheritance, religious and ethnic identity. We challenge racism and discrimination and seek to validate the cultural richness of our community. Our services demonstrate a commitment to mutual respect for cultural and religious differences. We also seek to develop a service framework that maximises the social and educational opportunities for all children in our community.

Children are entitled to be listened to and respected as individuals. Children are entitled to participate, as fully as their age and understanding enables them, in decisions that affect them. We are committed to ensuring children's views and needs are fully considered when making decisions affecting their lives.

Services for children in need are provided by the least intrusive method of intervention possible, consistent with safeguarding and promoting a child's wellbeing. The feasibility of a voluntary agreement should always be considered before seeking a legal order. The devising of a safety plan with the family is always our priority. Family support services are available both to children in need and children who are at risk of significant harm.

Disabled children should have the same rights as other children and the above principles apply equally to them.

### **3. Background**

The Children Act 2004 provides a legislative framework for developing effective and accessible services focused around the needs of children, young people and families. The Government's aim is for every child, whatever their background or their circumstances, to have the support they need to:

- Be healthy
- Stay safe
- Enjoy and achieve
- Make a positive contribution
- Achieve economic well-being

These five outcomes are universal ambitions for every child and young person, whatever their background or circumstances. Improving outcomes for all children and young people underpins all service planning and delivery within children's services – and partnership arrangements with other agencies. Improving outcomes also involves narrowing the gap between disadvantaged children and their peers.

As part of the programme to meet children's needs, several areas of improvement have been identified:

- More integrated, accessible and personalised services built around the needs of children and young people, not around professional or service boundaries

- Shift to prevention and improved focus on safeguarding and promoting the welfare of all children
- Workforce reform to ensure sufficient, suitably trained staff. All staff working with children will have a common core of knowledge and understanding about children's needs and increased understanding and trust between professionals
- Development of the Common Assessment Framework, team around the child and lead professionals
- Promotion of the Signs of Safety approach within our Family Support ethos enabling all services to work in partnership with a family securing positive, child centred outcomes

Children's Social Care provides specialist services under the Children Act 1989 in relation to children in need, child protection and children in care. The Children Act 2004 gives a duty to both safeguard and promote the welfare of children. Responsibilities for safeguarding children are set out in 'Working Together to Safeguard Children' (DFE, 2015) and in MKSCB's Interagency Safeguarding Procedures, <http://www.mkscb.org/policy-procedures/>.

#### **4. Family Support in Milton Keynes**

In Milton Keynes over the last ten years, Children's Social Care has, with its partners, developed a strong ethos and practice of 'Family Support'. Family Support can be defined as:

- Effective and focused interventions with families, where children are at risk of suffering significant harm or of coming into care.
- The promotion of family centred solutions, changing parental behaviour to make children safe, healthy and able to enjoy and achieve.
- Family Support seeks to produce sustained change leading to better parenting and a more secure attachment for the child.

Children's Social Care has a statutory responsibility to ensure the safeguarding of children and young people, particularly within their own family. This responsibility is often referred to as Child Protection.

Children's Social Care also has responsibility for promoting wellbeing for children who need safeguarding and for children in need. Thus effective safeguarding, child protection and promoting wellbeing are the purpose and aims of Children's Social Care. Family Support in Milton Keynes is the term for the broad methodology used to achieve these aims.

Family support is about getting alongside a family, understanding the situation from their perspective and helping them identify the key issues which lead to the compromising of children's needs. Family support promotes holistic approaches with the family enabling them to express their own opinions, tell their own story and find their own solutions to identified problems. The family are included from the outset in the interventions used and participate in settings goals, establishing safety plans and evaluating the outcomes.

In the often stressful, high risk and highly active environment of Children's Social Care it is all too easy to lose sight of our purpose and our values. This is often illustrated by a tendency to behave in punitive, risk averse ways towards some of the most vulnerable children and families in our society. In our work with families we are seeking to stop, listen and think about what has been said and the meaning this has for the child's welfare. Our adoption of the Signs of Safety approach to family support will help us to achieve family centred solutions promoting a more proactive, child centred role for our workers.

Effective family support is built on high quality assessments where family members have active involvement. Information about reported concerns is gathered from family and services alike culminating in a clear report of concerns, strengths and what needs to happen. Child centred assessments focus on strengths and protective factors as well as weaknesses and risks. The social care practitioner acts as a

'change agent' helping the family to develop realistic and attainable goals through intensive support and direct work with them. .

Family support is not about colluding with a family and focusing on parents' needs rather than the children. Family support using the Signs of Safety approach involves a clear and unambiguous approach with key concerns discussed and evaluated at the outset of contact. This leads to the establishment of a safety and support plan where the family are actively involved in undertaking specified tasks to promote better approaches to children's needs. Safeguarding children and promoting their welfare is at the heart of family support. This robust approach, being open and honest with parents/carers while remaining empathic is sometimes termed '*authoritative social work*'<sup>(3)</sup>.

This overall approach to Family Support is endorsed by the White Paper, 'Care Matters – Time for Change' 2007 and subsequent policy and legislation.

*"In response to the Care Matters Green Paper, many children and young people told us they would prefer to remain with their birth parents or wider family rather than come into care and that they wanted services to facilitate this wherever possible. ....care by a relative should be considered before any decision is made that a child should come into care. It is essential that services are designed to identify early those families who need support, including children in need of safeguarding, in order to prevent the need for children to enter care.*

*"This approach...needs to be a sophisticated one, with a range of services made available to support families as and when they need it. These will include intensive interventions where family difficulties are complex and enduring; better access to support care and short-term breaks; tailored support for adults whose own difficulties are impacting on their ability to parent....." (Chapter 2, p30)*

Similarly, the Public Law Outline from the Ministry of Justice with regard to child care proceedings, seeks to *"...encourage early intervention to find resolutions before cases reach court...(and)...ensure applications are only made after all safe, appropriate alternatives have been fully explored."*

## **5. Implementing Family Support**

We know that the needs of the families we support are diverse and our responses must be tailored to individual need and family circumstances. However, there are some consistently occurring features in the families referred to our services. Adult behaviours and health are central to understanding parenting capacity which is often limited to a greater or lesser extent by parental mental ill health, learning difficulties and drug and alcohol misuse. These behaviours can lead to dysfunctional and chaotic family circumstances which result in the neglect of children's needs.

We have developed our response in particular to these circumstances, through a more multi-professional skills mix in our services (e.g. the inclusion of adult primary mental health and substance misuse workers) and, in particular, a robust and tested methodological approach. We are establishing more effective working relationships with our adult social care and other Community Well Being colleagues given the centrality of understanding a child or young person's needs in the context of both the parent/ child relationship and the parent's own needs<sup>(4)</sup>.

With some families, support must be long term. The level of family dysfunction within the families who come to our attention is often very entrenched and quick fix solutions will not work. We need to stabilise a family's situation and then consider how best to approach long term change where that is consistent with the welfare of the children. Sometimes we need to accept that parents will not or cannot change but, particularly where attachments are strong, make a decision that the best we can do is provide continued

support to maintain children within those familial networks. Critical to our assessment of children's needs is an understanding of the importance of *emotional warmth and positive attachment* and the role this plays in predictions of future positive outcome.

To deliver this approach, Children's Social Care has developed resources to provide 7 day a week family advice and support and intensive family support (that is, rapid response service to prevent breakdown of families). The Intensive Support Service works with families whose children are on the edge of care and/or who are on Child Protection Plans. Families are provided regular support, sometimes on a daily basis. This support includes the provision of therapeutic support to the parents to try and resolve some of the emotional and psychological difficulties that get in the way of effective parenting. Three Primary Mental Health Practitioners employed by CSC work intensively with parents on issues identified. Clear plans of work are identified and reviewed on a regular basis to ensure intervention is successful. Should there be agreement that progress is not being made evidence can be provided from the intervention to demonstrate that all avenues have been tried to support the child in the home environment.

We also provide a home care for families in difficulty, support with parenting and child-care through family centres/ early intervention centre, and support care through fostering (day-time/ overnight breaks). This spectrum of services has been developed over time and operates according to some key principles:

- Partnership with parents and children and other key players (school, health, etc.) – listening to everyone's views
- Empowering of children and families to find own solutions
- Clear contract, solution focused, time limited and evaluated
- Based on an agreed plan that identifies goals and expectations on all
- Evidence-based behavioural approach focused on developing skills within the family system
- Practical help based on problems identified in here and now
- Established effective methods such as Webster Stratton
- With built in evaluation from participants

Family support services are provided as a response to children in need or children at risk of significant harm. Unless there are child protection concerns we would normally expect that the child and family will be involved in a voluntary plan under the Milton Keynes Family Assessment (MKFA); this is based on the Common Assessment Framework (CAF). The aim is to try and resolve any concerns, prior to a referral for Children's Social Care specialist services.

Family support requires able and skilled practitioners. The role of our social care practitioners is a challenging one, requiring a range of complex skills and a sound knowledge base from which to practice. Of paramount importance are the skills and knowledge required to carry out high quality assessments and implement effective interventions with families. Our workers must possess an understanding of both the physical and emotional development of children and young people, have the ability to make positive relationships with families and other professionals and possess strong report writing and oral skills. Our workers also need to be confident, articulate, professional and energetic, and possess emotional resilience and determination. The implementation of our Signs of Safety model is providing our workers with new skills and knowledge in keeping with these objectives.

Family support is most effective when undertaken with support from other professionals and services with specialist knowledge and skills. Our workers need to work with and respect the skills brought by Child & Adolescent Mental Health services (CAMHS), health visitors, educational psychologists, children's centres and services involved in supporting parents who can all contribute to effective family support.

Family support is most effective when we are able to adopt a 'Think Family' approach, bringing the skills of those professionals from mental health, learning disability and housing and similar services, who are working with adult family members, together with children's services to work holistically with the family as a unit.

Early Years services and children's centres have a significant contribution to make in providing both child care and parenting advice and support to families in need. Specialist family support will work very closely with Early Years to ensure that resources are used effectively to maximise support available to families in need.

Where we do need to bring children into the care system, the quicker they return, the higher the chance of successful reunification. We must always ensure that, consistent with the child's safety and wellbeing, we try everything we can to get children back home.

However, we are aware that some adults present serious risk to children and in these circumstances the concept of dangerousness emerges. The ability to assess risk accurately is crucial and the ability to act immediately is vital. Protective factors and the strengths of families need to be emphasised in every instance, but in high risk scenarios, a child's welfare and safety is always paramount. Whilst we want to give a clear message that we are in the business of supporting families, child protection takes priority every time.

## **6. Family Support Process**

The children and family are at the centre of the process. Some key ways of engaging families are to ask the following simple questions, which will also assist the family to identify their needs and how they could be met by ongoing support. The family are encouraged to discuss their needs in terms of the risks these generate for their children.

1. What is worrying you about your child / the situation?
2. What would you like to change / what would make a difference?
3. Who could help you with this?
4. What do you feel *you* need to do (to create this change/ make things different)?

At the core of Family Support is the multi-agency Family Support (Child in Need) Plan. A family support meeting will develop a plan with the family to support them in addressing the perceived difficulties in an open and honest way. Normally a family support meeting will follow a children and families assessment, following referral to Children's Social Care. The meeting will agree a safety plan, what each service will provide, what parents/ carers/ relatives agree to do, what monitoring arrangements will be and when the review meeting will be held.

Family support meetings and subsequent plans will not just address safeguarding and parenting issues, but also look more holistically at the wider needs of the child in terms of health, education and positive activities. Family support is about bringing change in families, enabling parents to acknowledge the concerns and develop better ways of meeting their children's needs.

In every new and existing case where there are safeguarding concerns the social worker will always consult with a child protection co-ordinator to consider whether a family support plan is appropriate or whether the level of concerns and degree of inter-agency working requires a more formal child protection plan (see 'levels of intervention' below). This discussion and its outcome will always be recorded. Consultation will also occur following the production of a family support plan.



Families will be encouraged to review their progress at family support review meetings and this will be recorded in the family support review notes. Family support will end once risk issues are minimised and families have established a more consistent approach to meeting their children's needs. Where families are consistently not achieving targets and significant risk continues, an assessment will be undertaken to determine what additional intervention is needed and whether child protection processes are necessary. Normally a Family Support Plan should not continue more than twelve months, with a review every three months.

The strength of the Family Support ethos in Milton Keynes empowers the family to generate (whenever possible) their own solutions without the stigma of the Child Protection process. The success of the family support process is also dependent on the multi agency commitment to attend family support meetings, contribute to family support plans and develop a culture of open and honest dialogue with fellow practitioners from partner agencies and with families. The Signs of Safety model is helping to cement this process.

Family Support is also enhanced by the use of Family Group Conferencing (FGC), a voluntary approach that engages with wider families to support them to find solutions and build on their strength as a family to support other family members. FGCs have resulted in innovative solutions for children that keep them within their wider family without the need for formal child protection plans or care proceedings. FGCs can be used at any stage from initial assessment to during care proceedings. FGCs are not the only way of engaging the wider family and social workers are encouraged to engage with wider family members to explore solutions.

We offer a range of parenting approaches to engage with families and help parents develop a more authoritative approach to parenting, whilst developing play and having fun with emotional warmth. Parenting services in Milton Keynes offer 'Mellow Parenting', 'Strengthening Families', 'Families & Schools Together', Human Givens, Triple P, a wide range of interventions that support systemic social care practice. We also provide specialist attachment assessments – Meaning of the Child Interview, Adult Attachment Interview, Meaning of the Child Assessment, Care Index, Parenting + assessment Narrative Story Stems, Play Therapy Parenting Assessment Manual Software (PAMS), Child Attachment Interview, and Marshak Interaction Method (MIM).

#### Parenting+

Parenting+ involves intensive work alongside families using video observation and feedback within the family home, supporting parents to identify and understand possible underlying causes of and barriers to managing their children's behaviour within the context of a secure, supportive, empathetic relationship.

#### Care Index

Care-Index is a 3minute video observation of playful interaction between parent and child that can be used to assess the parent-child relationship or the quality of parent-child interaction. CARE-Index is used as a screening tool to provide information about parents' sensitivity and responsiveness to their child's signals and children's strategies for coping with parents' behaviour. Care-Index aims to assess parental sensitivity, in terms of risk and planning for interventions.

#### Meaning of the child interview

Meaning of the child interview is a method of understanding the way parents think about their child(ren) through careful analysis of a semi-structured interview with the parent. Interviews are carefully analysed according to a system that examines the ways in which parents talk about their child, their relationship with their child, and their parenting. Interviews are classified for the level of risk (Sensitive, controlling or unresponsive)

### Child Attachment Interview (CAI)

CAI is a semi-structured interview designed by Target et al. (2003) for children aged 7 to 11. It is based on the Adult Attachment Interview, adapted for children by focussing on representations of relationships with parents and attachment related events. Scores are based on both verbal and non-verbal communications

### Marshak Interaction Method (MIM)

The MIM is used to evaluate the relationship between parent-child and to inform the future use of Theraplay techniques, an attachment based therapy.

This is a structured technique for observing and assessing the overall quality and nature of relationships between caregivers and child. It consists of a series of simple tasks designed to elicit behaviours in four primary dimensions in order to **evaluate the caregivers' capacity to:**

- Set limits and provide an appropriately ordered environment (Structure)
- Engage the child in interaction while being attuned to the child's state (Engagement)
- Meet the child's needs for attention, soothing and care (Nurture)
- Support and encourage the child's efforts to achieve at a developmentally appropriate level (Challenge)
- The child's ability to respond to the caregivers' efforts

The MIM is designed to assess the quality and nature of the relationship between a child and her carer. It makes it possible to assess how the child responds to his carer's efforts to:

- Structure the environment and set clear, appropriate expectations and limits
- Engage the child in interaction while being attuned to the child's state and reactions
- Respond in a nurturing way to the child's needs, including being able to soothe and calm the child when needed
- Provide appropriate challenge

### Parenting Assessment Manual Software (PAMS)

The PAMS assessment covers child care and development, behaviour, management, independent living skills, safety and hygiene, parent's relationships and support etc. Each parenting skill is assessed for parental knowledge, quality of parenting skill and the frequency of parenting practice. The PAMS will provide a clear parent profile of functioning and areas where further support learning is required.

### Adult Attachment Interview

The Adult Attachment Interview is intended to investigate parent's personal history and current state of mind, and initiate a potentially therapeutic process by activating the speaker's mind in new ways. It enables professionals to more fully understand a parent's thinking and behaviour and make sense of barriers to parent's progress and change. It offers the speaker the opportunity to know and be known by others through a therapeutic form of assessment.

### Narrative Story Stem

Story Stem assessment can offer a comprehensive understanding of a child's behaviour and ways of thinking and feeling in his or her close relationships. The Story Stems (story beginnings given by the interviewer but completed by the child) are designed to elicit information about a child's representations of parents and care giving. This gives insight into a child's experiences within their family and their attachment to the significant adults in their lives. It can also be used to examine the nature of sibling relationships. They provide a map of the child's expectations of care and protection from his or her key relationships.

## Play therapy

Play Therapy is a mode of therapy that helps children to explore their feelings, to express themselves and to make sense of their life experiences. It supports children to modify their behaviours, clarify their self-concept and build healthy relationships. In Play Therapy, children enter into a dynamic relationship with the therapist that enables them to express, explore and make sense of their difficult and painful experiences. Play Therapy helps children find healthier ways of communicating, develop fulfilling relationships, increase resiliency and facilitate emotional literacy.

## **7. Participation & Evaluation**

It is important that family support in Children's Social Care is monitored and evaluated to ensure that it remains effective for the children and families who participate in it. Children and families are involved at all stages of the family support process – in the assessment, developing the care/safety plan and in its review.

We will develop ways of setting baselines at the outset of family support and then involve the family at mid and end points in evaluating what has been achieved and what has changed. Evaluation needs to be collected and recorded in a systematic way so the effectiveness of the service can be measured and so that we can learn from families using the service how it can be approved.

We will ensure that family support plans are well recorded on ICS, with clear objectives, and subsequently robustly audited to discover whether objectives have been achieved. Supervision and file audit are important parts of the process to ensure that intervention is having a positive impact, that progress is constantly evaluated by the worker, and decisions are made based on well recorded evidence and analysis, with a clear rationale.

We will ensure that training and personal development support are available to practitioners to learn the skills required to deliver effective family support, to engage with the child and the family and to evaluate the effectiveness of the intervention.

## **8. Conclusion**

The Family Support Approach sets out the practice of professional staff in Milton Keynes Council's Children and Families Specialist Services and key partners such as community health, police and schools in working with children and families with intensive needs. This approach is about working with children and families, listening to their concerns and perceptions, and focusing on the child's whole system to identify solutions and bring about change.

This approach requires skilled, confident and authoritative social care practitioners with a strong commitment to child centred practice. Our services are committed to providing sufficient time, support and resources to enable the best possible outcomes to be achieved for our most vulnerable children and their families.

Family support must be flexible, adaptable and creative. We will seek the feedback and comments from our service users to help us make the necessary changes ensuring we continue to deliver high quality child centred services in our expanding and changing community.

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