

# The Milton Keynes Family Support Ethos

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## **Introduction by Melinda May – Group Head of Service, Children and Families**

Over the last few years, available funding has substantially decreased for Children's Social Care, whilst at the same time referrals, assessments, the number of children subject to child protection plans and the number of children in care and proceedings has increased across the country. Milton Keynes Children's Social Care (MKCSC) is no exception and reflects the national picture of increasing volumes for Tier 4 services. There does not appear to be evidence that children are suffering from increased harm however professional anxieties, rather than emphasis on family responsibilities, continue to drive demand upwards. This has led to a greater percentage of budgets being spent on a very small number of children who are in care. The average cost of a child in care for a year is £45K and we know, in general, being in care does not lead to good long-term outcomes for most children.

We believe there are unique advantages for children experiencing family life in their own birth family; by harnessing the unique strengths within families, we are best able to support them to achieve better outcomes for their children. In order to meet the needs of children and families to prevent them escalating into care, we understand that the most effective way to support children is to work with them and their families in a systemic, restorative and problem solving way. We aim to work collaboratively with families where we seek to stop, listen and think about what has been said and the meaning this has for the child's welfare, whilst maintaining a clear focus upon the safety of the child. Parents and carers are usually the best people to understand and meet their child's needs and although parenting can be challenging, support works well when parents are respected and listened to by practitioners and we involve them at every step along the way.

The most effective support is tailored to the family's needs and is multi-agency in its approach. The challenge is to develop and adopt this asset and strength based approach across the wider children's system. Having a unified approach to social work across the organisation promotes good evidence of informed practice, a coherent and consistent focus on the way the organisation operates and fidelity to an evidenced-based methodology.

To strengthen the MKC Family Support ethos, we promote Signs of Safety as our methodology of practice. Signs of Safety (SOS) compliments our Family Support values and vision; it is systemic, strengths based and solution focused. It ensures a more proactive, child centred role for our social workers to help families to change so that the safety, development and well-being of children are enhanced.

MKCSC were one of the first to introduce the Family Support Ethos and we believe that this method of intervention has enhanced all areas of practice from planning through to direct intervention and this is reflected in our outcomes across the service. It is a system of 'done with' rather than 'done to' and we believe it gives families every opportunity to parent their children, which ultimately promotes the best outcomes for children in Milton Keynes.

## Family Support Ethos

Milton Keynes Children's Social Care and our partners follow a strong and well understood 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.

Our Family Support Ethos sets out the guiding principles for working with children and their families in Milton Keynes.

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

This document provides an overview of the Family Support Ethos: how it fits with the statutory responsibilities of children's social care; how we work with families and how we put it in to practice.

## Statutory responsibility

Children's Social Care has a statutory responsibility 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 2018)

Children's Social Care's responsibility is 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.

## Working with Families

If we are to reach out to families at risk we need to identify and make use of the opportunities to build tailored, flexible and holistic services that work with the whole family and can turn lives around. Signs of Safety uses the principles of the Family First thinking to ensure that families utilise their own resources and self-determination to create plans and outcomes they can own.

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 setting 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 commitment to the Signs of Safety approach to family support helps 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 Signs of Safety 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'.

## Family Support in Milton Keynes model of intervention

In Milton Keynes we work to a model of intervention that sets out four levels of need; see figure 1 below. The Family Support Ethos 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 MK Together Safeguarding Partnership document, Levels of Need when working with Children, Young People and their Families in Milton Keynes; 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 - Milton Keynes Effective Support Windscreen

This document explains the practice expectations for the service to fulfil the Family Support Ethos. This will ensure that everyone is clear on what the ethos looks like in and how it is used with children, young people and families in their service area. The methodology is part of our wider organisational approach to safeguarding, The Golden Triangle. This brings together the Quality First Principles of effective practice, the local authority's Family Support Ethos and Signs of Safety methodology to ensure a family-focused and efficient operating model.

## 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 youth and community 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.

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 services to prevent breakdown of families. Those 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 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 service 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 the 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 Early Help Assessment; 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.

Children and Families Practices offer early help services for families with additional or considerable needs which don’t meet the threshold for statutory intervention. The three teams cover the same locality areas as our children’s social care Family Support Teams.

The role of our social care family support 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. Our Signs of Safety model provides our workers with skills and knowledge in keeping with these objectives.

Family support is most effective when undertaken in collaboration with other professionals and services with specialist knowledge and skills. Our workers 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.

## 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 child protection concerns the social worker will always consult with an Independent Chair (Safeguarding & Quality Assurance Service) 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. 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 way to meet 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 methodology helps 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.

Additionally to strengthen this way of working 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). (More detail in Appendix 1).

## Appendix 1 – Specialist Assessments

### 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.