Outcomes for Permanence and Stability for Children in Long-term Care: Practice Guidance

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1.0 Introduction

An important deliverable of the research project *Outcomes for Permanence and Stability for Children in Long-Term Care* (Moran et al. 2017)[1] is accompanying practice guidance.This guidance is developed specifically from the findings and learning from the research. It focuses on how practice can be improved and further developed to enhance positive outcomes for permanence and stability for children in care.

This practice guide builds on the conclusions and recommendations of the report. It is intended to offer specific insights based on a locally focused study of two counties. It should be read in conjunction with the following additional documents and resources:

- Literature review on Outcomes for Permanence and Stability for Children in Long term care
- Practitioner Guide to the Literature Review
- Alternative Care Handbook (Tusla, 2014)
- TUSLA policy and procedures relating to Alternative care,See www.tusla.ie/services/alternative-care/

The practice builds on some of the key messages from the research which are as follows:

- While many of the intrinsic and extrinsic factors that affect children's outcomes for permanence and stability are outside of the practitioners control to change or ameliorate, the processes involved in supporting children in care and their respective families are very much within their control.
- Three processes were found to be most significant as enablers or barriers to stability for children in care: relationships, communication and support.
- The importance of continuity in terms of time, place, relationships, support and networks is identified as the main over-arching theme.
- A socio-ecological framework is proposed as the most appropriate overarching context within which to plan, intervene and evaluate services relating to children in care. The framework developed in this research specifically emphasises the need to be aware of multiple layers and levels at the micro and meso level for the child and/or the young person in care or who has aged out of care.
- Figures 1 (b) and 2(b) from the study illustrate these core messages.

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[1] Moran, L., McGregor, C. and Devaney, C. (2017) Outcomes for Permanence and Stability for Children in Long-term Care. Galway: The UNESCO Child and Family Research Centre, The National University of Ireland, Galway

The aim of the practice guidance is to apply the learning from the research study to inform practice with children in care, their families and with foster families. The specific objectives are to provide guidance on how the learning from the research can:

- Be integrated into day-to-day practice
- Used in Supervision and Reflective Practice
- Applied to enhance existing approaches used in practice
- Inform care planning processes
- Inform foster carer training
- Inform practice in relation to direct work with children
- Inform practice with parents and families of origin and foster parents and families
- Inform service planning and resource allocation.

Figure 1(b) below shows the range of positive and negative internal and external factors that affect young people's permanence and stability as learnt from the project literature review published in 2016 (Moran et al, 2016a; 2016b)[2]. Many of these factors are outside of the practitioners control but they need to be understood for each individual scenario. This table could be used with individual cases to identify which factors impact on permanence and stability. This could be added to the care record/plan as a reminder to keep a focus on checking on the impact of these factors on the young person's wellbeing at any particular point in time.

Irrespective of the factors listed, our research found that a focus on positive relationships between all parties involved in the child's life; effective communication from practitioners/Tusla with the child/ young person, parent and foster care and appropriate support significantly influence stability for children in care. Underpinning these three themes, we argue that continuity of care placements, relationships and networks is crucially important for helping children to feel that the stable in their alternative care setting. These findings mirror the themes that Vera Fahlberg highlights in her well-known book *'A Child's Journey Through Placement'*. Resurfacing from every chapter are the significance of interpersonal relationships, the necessity of building alliances with children and adults by enhancing communication skills, increasing the individual's knowledge of self, and the importance of developing a plan for continuity of relationships throughout a lifetime' (Fahlberg, 2012; 12-13)[3].

[3]

[2] Moran, L., McGregor, C. and Devaney, C. (2016a) Scoping review of Irish and international literature on outcomes for permanence and stability for children in care Dublin: Tusla, the Child and Family Agency.
Moran, L., McGregor, C. and Devaney, C. (2016b) Practitioner's Guide to the Irish and International Literature on outcomes for permanence and stability for children in care Dublin: Tusla, the Child and Family Agency

[3] Fahlberg, V. (2012) A Child's Journey Through Placement. London/Philadelphia. Jessica Kingsley.

Factors that influence Permanence and Stability

Positive Impact

Internal Factors

Good Mental Health
Positive Behavioural and Emotional Development
No signs of Trauma/Trauma resolved
Experiences Prior to Entry Care are resolved or non-problematic
Younger at Entry to Care
Positive Self-Esteem
Confidence and positive self- identity
Positive school experiences
Development of positive peer network
Absence of involvement in substance misuse
Absence of involvement in anti-social behaviour
Positive relationships with social workers

External Factors

- No placement moves or few placement moves
- Stable family structure
- Stable social network
- Foster parents' ability to cope with a child's behaviour or complex needs;
- High motivation and commitment of whole family to fostering
- Foster carers well-resourced, healthy, and secure
- Good quality foster home
- Realistic expectations of foster parents from system
- Good health status of foster carers and extended foster family
- High quality social and service support
- Access to adequate financial resources
- Alignment in expectations among families,
- Positive relationships between foster carers and families of origin

Relationships
Communication
Service Support

Continuity

Negative Impact

Internal Factors

- Poor Mental Health
- Behavioural Problems
- Emotional Problems
- Learning Difficulties
- Poor school experiences
- Feeling and Experiencing Trauma
- Older at Entry to Care
- Experiences Prior to Entry to Care continue to impact negatively
- In-care experiences impact negatively
- Negative peer dynamics/group behaviours
- Poor Self-Esteem
- Negative self-identity
- Substance misuse
- Involvement in Anti-Social Behaviour

External Factors

- Number of moves in care
- Unstable peer network/social network disruption
- Family structure
- Foster parents' inability to cope with a child's behaviour or complex needs;
- Carers' advancing age
- Reduced motivation to foster;
- Foster carers who move away from the area
- Lack of financial resources,
- Foster carer's experiences of ill-health, and/or bereavement
- Poor quality of foster home, unrealistic expectations of foster parents
- Poor relationships between foster parents and families of origin
- Poor quality of social and service support
- Poor quality relationships with social workers
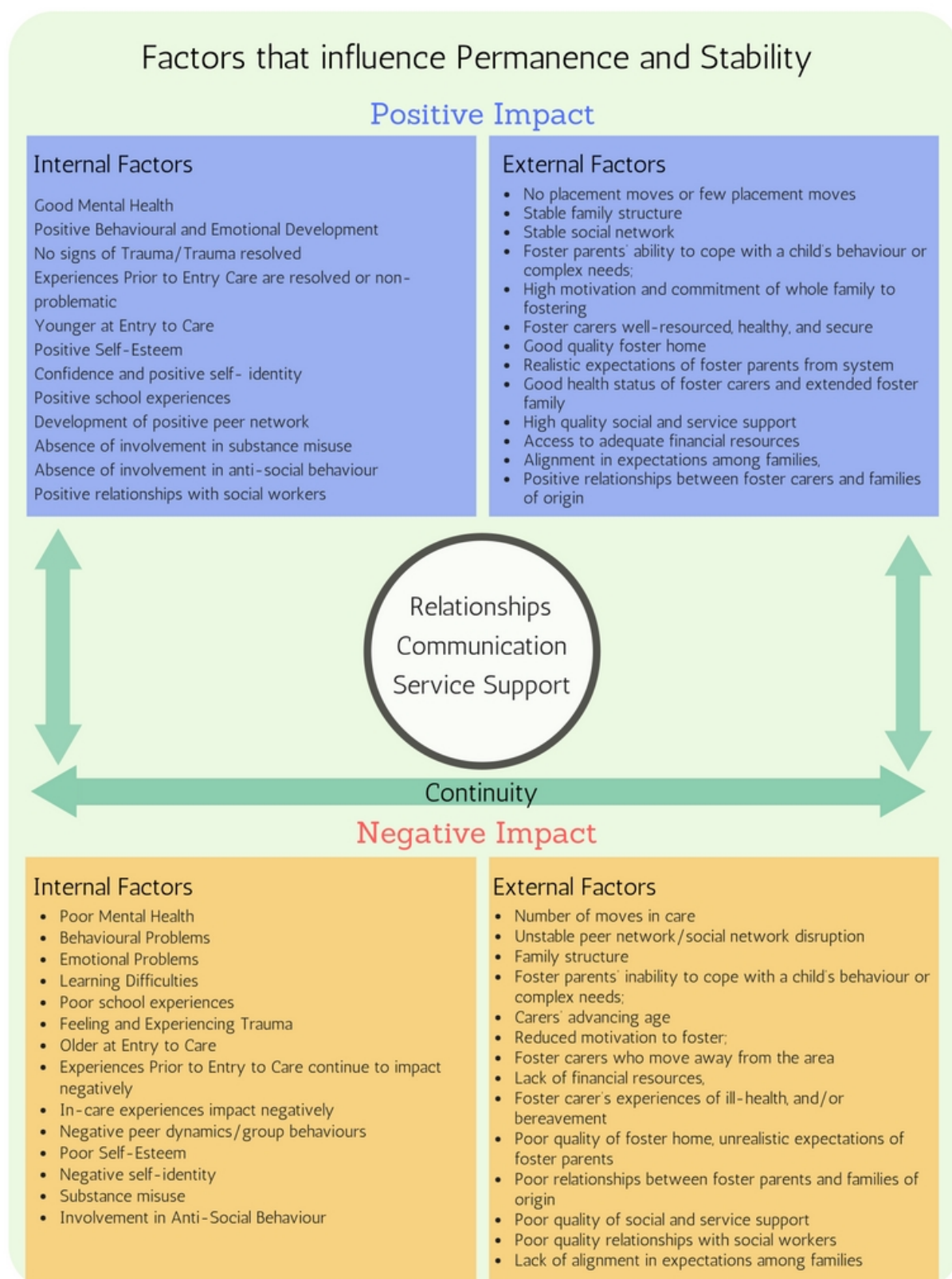- Lack of alignment in expectations among families

Figure 1 (b): Factors (revised) that influence permanence and stability

Figure 2 (b) below uses a socio-ecological model to show the range of interactions in a child's life when they are in care. It has added overlapping micro and meso systems to capture the message from the research that often children are balancing and negotiating between two systems. Whether there is significant contact or not, the importance of ongoing support in understanding and managing the impact of a dual micro and meso system is emphasised in the findings. This relates not just to families but to friends, peers, networks and activities that the child may be involved in. This is especially important for older children. The focus on exo and macro is crucial. This represents, for example, the Tusla office setting which represents the team/resources/supports available (exo) and the wider Alternative Care Tusla policy (macro). The chrono system denotes that a map is a reflection of a moment in time and will change.

Most practitioners are likely to be very familiar with Bronfenbrenner's ecological model and its use in assessment practices. This knowledge can be usefully applied to working with children in care and their families' (Bronfenbrenner 1979; 1994).[4] For example, this map could be drawn for each individual child. Details of important interactions in each system level could be recorded or drawn as pictures.
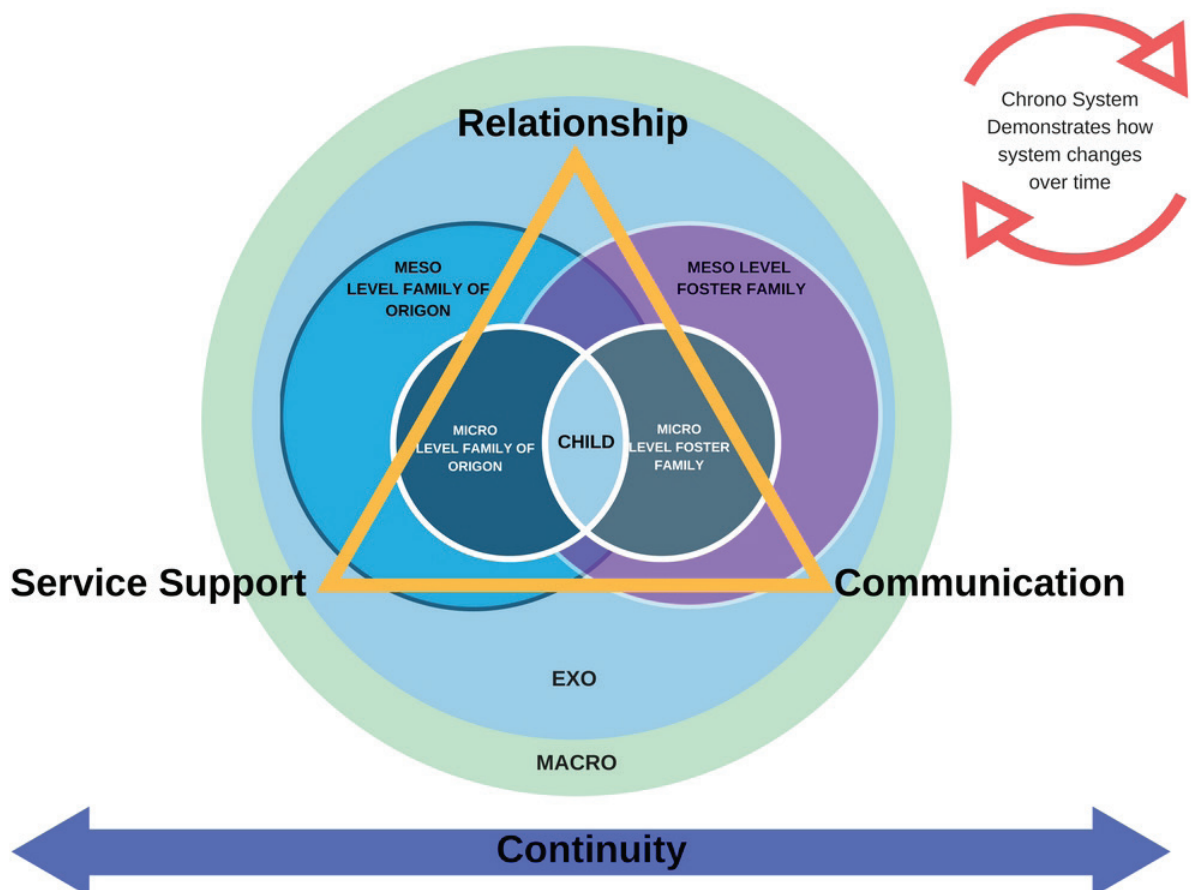

Figure 2 (b): Developed Socio-ecological framework

[4] Bronfenbrenner, U. (1994) 'Ecological models of human development' in Gauvain, M and Cole, M. (1994) (eds.) Readings on the development of children (2nd edn) New York: Freeman (pp. 87-103) , Bronfenbrenner, U. (`979) The ecology of human development Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press

2.0 Understanding Permanence and Stability

Recommendations and Key Messages were:

- That individual life experiences and care pathways from childhood shape and reflect permanence and stability;

- Maintaining good communication with all significant individuals within the young person's system is essential for ensuring a sense of stability. Particular attention should be paid in practice guidance regarding new ways for communicating day-to-day information about the young person to their family of origin;

- Formal and informal social support have a very significant impact throughout a child's time in care and after care.

- More recognition of the importance of continued support for parents of origin in respect to the interests of the child is needed.

Practice Guidance

WORKING WITH CHILDREN
Continue to develop and adapt use of life story books and similar tools to ensure a focus on the care pathway and life experiences is maintained during the process of a long term placement.

WORKING WITH FOSTER PARENTS AND FOSTER FAMILIES
Ensure in training and support that awareness of the impact of life experience and connection with the past and/or with family of origin remains significant for young people and they need to be facilitated to express these feelings.

WORKING WITH PARENTS AND FAMILIES OF ORIGIN
Use opportunities such as facilitation of access to engage with parents about the day-to-day lives of the young person. Encourage letter writing, diary keeping or daily logs to be maintained by foster parents and shared routinely with parents in review and contact arrangements.

GENERAL
Recognise and be reminded of the significant contribution to stability each individual practitioner makes in their support work with children, young people and adults. Ensure this is valued, supported and adequately resourced.Learn from the critical points made in the research that may be routine in a practitioners daily and busy work may be exceptional in the routine of the service user.

3.0 Impact of Pre-Care Experience

Recommendations and Key Messages were:

- To enhance a sense of permanence and stability, young people need to be helped to process what it means to go into care and the reasons for their personal experience. Supports in relation to this need should be continuous in recognition of the ongoing impact this can have.
- Practice Guidance should focus on communication with children and relationship building should be an ongoing priority for social work and social care staff given its clear significance to the child/young person's sense of support and stability. A focus on identity and family connections in working with young people in care is crucial.
- Greater emphasis on the socio-ecological approach in care planning, support practice and policy development can ensure that the role of minding and maintaining the young person's wider social support network, alongside his/her family networks is central in care planning and care support.

Practice Guidance Suggestions

WORKING WITH CHILDREN

Use existing opportunities through care planning and the review process to attend to the child's feelings and thoughts about their pre-care experiences and needs for support regarding this. Be aware that greater recognition of the importance of skills for communication with children is relatively recent and many practitioners who are experienced will not have had significant training in this through their qualification courses. Ongoing development of skills for communication with children such as art, drama, play and group work should feature on practitioners' CPD plans if they are supporting children in-care as part of their job.

WORKING WITH FOSTER PARENTS AND FOSTER FAMILIES

Support and Training for foster parents and families can draw from the research and literature from this study to emphasise key messages about the importance of constant awareness of impact of pre-care experience and the difficulties children can experience expressing these feelings because of feeling disloyal or torn between two families' identities or ties.

WORKING WITH PARENTS OF ORIGIN AND THIER FAMILIES

Ongoing work with the family of origin is crucially important to the young person's sense of stability to help them to make sense of why they are in care and to avoid feeling 'torn'

GENERAL

The socio-ecological mapping tool can be used to help conversations about pre-care experience with all parties involved.

The practitioners responsible for working with each of the individuals /families within this system can use the regular review process to work collaboratively to ensure all significant interactions within the system for the child – positive or negative- are considered from an ecological perspective. Appropriate interventions for each practitioner (e.g. the foster parents' social worker, the child's social worker and the parent of origin's social worker) can be agreed holistically to help 'mind and maintain' the child's support system.

4.0 In-care Experiences

4.1 Relationships

Recommendations and Key Messages were:

- Recognition of the importance of extensive child-centred practice skills and knowledge about the emotional impact of being in care should be emphasised in practice and policy development. Alongside this, the importance of explicit attention being paid to supporting the development of the relationship between the foster family and the family of origin throughout the care placement is highlighted.

- Practice Guidance should pay particular attention to the impact of power relations and power imbalance in social work interventions to help inform guidance on improving support for young people in care, foster carers and families of origin. Specific focus should be given to the balance between regulation and support required in these interventions.

- The need for ongoing support in relation to contact is emphasised. A wider systems approach to managing contact could ensure greater attention to maintaining and helping to manage a range of relationships that are important to a young person in care

- The pivotal role of the social worker in not just facilitating contact but helping young people to process the feelings and emotions linked to this needs to be recognised in practice development, supervision and support.

- More direct work with parents and families of origin while children in care would help them understand, support and engage effectively in supporting the care placement and ensuring greater stability for the young person.

Practice Guidance Suggestions

WORKING WITH CHILDREN
The importance of child centred practice skills is emphasised again with a focus on the importance of building relationships directly with the child and facilitating their relationships across their individual systems.

WORKING WITH FOSTER PARENTS AND FOSTER FAMILIES
Existing training for foster parents can use the research and literature findings, with a focus on the socio-ecological framework, to emphasise the importance of helping children manage important relationships and interactions in their systems that are necessarily more complex by virtue of being in care.

WORKING WITH PARENTS AND FAMILIES OF ORIGIN
Direct work with parents through the process of communication around contact and reviews, with a focus on helping them to see and understand the child's context from an eco-systems perspective is likely to lead to greater sense of stability and coherence for the young person in care. Additional resources in terms of time available to practitioners and additional supports for parents themselves when needed will be necessary to achieve this.

GENERAL
Some suggestions about how to work with the issue of power and power relations is provided in the conclusion as it relates to other sections also.

4.2 Placement Instability and Breakdown

Recommendations and Key Messages were:

- Practice guidance should consider how greater investment of support during times of transition can be provided.
- Guidance should also focus on the need for greater recognition of the impact of moving on young people and the need for support with transition between moves that are practical, emotional and social.
- Foster carer training and support needs to ensure the range of factors that can lead to break down are incorporated into training for foster parents and social work/family support.

Practice Guidance Suggestions

WORKING WITH CHILDREN

Often placement breakdown cannot be avoided but the support to the child at the time of the breakdown can be influenced. Significant and focused resources need to be available at this time. Work with the child needs to include therapeutic support focused on the emotional impact of the breakdown and move. Practitioners are well experienced to deliver this intervention but need to have sufficient time in their workload to enable them to deliver this essential support.

WORKING WITH FOSTER PARENTS AND FOSTER FAMILIES

Foster parents and their families likewise require specific investment and support during times of breakdown. This needs to include the full foster family in recognition of the wide impact breakdown has on the overall system. Individual tailored support for foster siblings should be provided as part of this. Foster care training could include examples from research such as this alongside other examples of foster carer experience to prepare them for the possibility of breakdown and the factors that can contribute to this.

WORKING WITH PARENTS OF ORIGIN AND THIER FAMILIES

Keeping a mind to the eco-system of the child, and the change a breakdown brings to this, explicit attention needs to be paid to what kind of intervention and support relating to the parents/families of origin may be required.

GENERAL

Learning from the findings of this study highlights the importance of intensive practical, emotional and social support needed for all active parties in the child's system during a period of breakdown or transition. Breakdown of placement is one of the starkest breaks to permanence and stability for the child and the way it is managed has lasting impact on their ability to achieve a new form of permanence and stability into their future homes. Close working between all practitioners involved with the family system is essential during these moments. Close support for each important element and interaction of the child's system should be explicit agreed and implemented.

5.0 After Care

Recommendations and Key Messages were:

- Adequate after care support for all young people leaving care should be available to assist with educational developments, social, psychological and emotional needs.
- Practice Guidance should accord attention to early preparation of young people from care should be developed to include a focus on family identity, development of networks and preparation for independent living.
- A socio-ecological mapping approach should be used in care planning to help young people develop a systematic plan for post-care and to enable identification of the most appropriate formal supports that should be provided.
- How to maximise opportunities for developing informal supports, especially for young people who did not have strong family ties or a strong sense of family identity with the foster carers, should be included in practice. This could include, for example, further development of the use of mentoring for young people in care.

Practice Guidance Suggestions

WORKING WITH CHILDREN
Continue to build on the practice guidance available through resources cited above with particular attention being paid to the importance of ensuring sufficient resources are available to do the essential support work with children in care. There is clear evidence that children generally have better outcomes if they have strong relationships with the practitioners and teams supporting them; experience good communication between different elements of their system and receive appropriate and effective support. The absence of these three ingredients can directly negatively impact on the child's permanence and stability with long-term impacts arising from this.

WORKING WITH FOSTER PARENTS AND FOSTER FAMILIES
Continue to develop fo ster carer training and support through learning from and implementing findings of research such as this study.

WORKING WITH PARENTS OF ORIGIN AND THIER FAMILIES
This research suggests that parents of origin and their families would benefit from greater ongoing relationships with the system. Greater attention could be paid to how they can be engaged with in a way that maximises the child's sense of security in care planning and review.

GENERAL
This research and the associated literature offers up-to-date insights into the core factors that impact on stability and permanence for children in care. Maintaining continuity of placements and practitioner's recognition of important relationships in micro and meso systems is crucial.The benefit of development planning, review and intervention services specifically around the socio-ecological framework can add an additional resource to the existing guidance.

6.0   Conclusions

'If "the system" makes it difficult for us to meet the child's needs, then we must change the system rather than asking the child to forego their basic requirements' (Fahlberg, 2012; 12). This research shows how important the support provided by Tusla practitioners to children in care, their foster parents and their families of origin is. The impact that interventions from Tusla can have on permanence and stability are significant. Many of the factors that lead to children coming into care cannot be easily changed, but the way the child is supported once in care is within the powers of the service to deliver.

This research suggest that a focus on managing and negotiating effective communications between different elements of the system; managing relationships and delivering support services that are appropriate and sensitive to the particular needs of the particular moment is the most important element of best practice for supporting children to achieve positive outcomes for permanence and stability. Awareness of the emotional impact of being in care and the sensitivity that can exist around identity, perceived stigma and lack of 'normality' is especially important.

The importance of continuity in all aspects of the child's experience is emphasised by this research. This evidence can be used as a mechanism to argue for resources and support in processes such as care review reports, court reports, case conference and regular care planning and review processes. All efforts need to be made to have as little disruption for the young person as possible with regard to not only where they live but in the regular support they receive.

Power and power relations featured significantly in the narratives of our interviewees. Given the context of children being in care, such an acute awareness of power and power relations is not surprising and is indeed inevitable given the role Tusla play as 'corporate parent'. Given the duty Tusla has once a child is in long term care to support the day to day foster carer to provide a permanent living arrangement for the child alongside providing the practitioners from the service to deliver the required interventions and supports, the powers and responsibilities of all relevant persons in the child's eco-system need to be explicitly stated and acknowledged. Such powers are necessary to intervene and have the potential to be used either positively to enhance or negatively to diminish.

Critical reflection on the nature and impact of inevitable power differences and sometimes power struggles can be explored through supervision. For example, use questions like: What power do I have in this situation (e.g. legal, personal, and professional), what power does Tusla the organisation have (e.g. statutory, legal; resources)? what power has the family of origin? (e.g. through communication; level of co-operation)? The foster family (e.g. in day to day interactions; communication; relationships) ? What power has the child (e.g. participation in review; expressing preference and opinion; engaging; communicating)? This helps to identify both positive and negative effects of power relations. It also gives more explicit expression to what is implicitly inevitable.

Practitioners are aware of the need to balance regulation and protection in a child welfare setting. This research study brings to life some of the core challenges that comes with having this dual role in relation to the provision of care and support for children in alternative living arrangements. This research points to certain developments in practice that can enhance how this is explicitly addressed in communications and through relationships with children and their respective families.

In sum, the practice guidance from this research can be summarised as follows:

- Identify, recognise and continue to develop examples of best practice already in place in each of the teams involved in this study.
- Use this research, the literature review and other studies to build evidence and guidance for practice including court report writing, case conference reports and care plans and reviews.
- Identify gaps from this research (e.g. in this study, we have identified the absence of views of practitioners and policy makers) and consider how these gaps might be addressed (e.g. through forms for practice based research; through student MA dissertations; seek further funded commissioned research; develop further opportunities for partnership research within the Tusla areas).
- Find mechanisms to share and disseminate best practice within teams and consider how this learning can be disseminated to the wider national context also.
- Identify further training in a range of skills for communication with children through diverse mediums as a priority for individual and team learning plans as part of their CPD in recognition that this area has been less developed in most practitioners training to date.
- Teams could consider developing their own 'working with children in care pack' informed by the research. This could include materials such as eco-maps, feeling cards, life path/life story sheets; toy mobile phone and finger puppets (see Fahlberg 2012 for many other useful practical suggestions).
- Consider adapting the socio-ecological framework as a tool to inform preparation for care planning and care reviews in a systematic way (e.g. develop guidance to this effect for the care plan forms and process).
- Accurately identify the ideal level of engagement for children in care to address practice, social and emotional needs at various points in time and specify resource gaps that prevent best practice. Make specific calculations for additional supports required for periods of breakdown or transition.
- Ensure effective team working within Tusla across the teams working with the core elements of the system including the child; the foster family, the family of origin and the family and community support services that may be drawn on for extra support. A strategy for collaborative 'team around the child' meetings to align with care reviews for example may be usefully developed.
- Develop reflective tools for supervision, using the socio-ecological model and the findings of this research to inform discussions and planning for work with children in care and their planning.
- Individuals and managers can use findings from this study to inform decision making about future training requirements for practitioners.
- This research study provides timely information and recommendations that can inform the development of the Alternative Care Strategy.

PRACTICE NOTES:

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