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The potential of family essential lifestyle plans

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We believe that Family Essential Lifestyle Plans will prove to be a valuable tool to use for families and professionals within a number of health, and social care settings. Here, using the words of staff and families who have begun to explore Essential Lifestyle Planning with us, we briefly discuss some of the possibilities we are exploring, and how the service, children, and their families may experience a difference to service deliver and outcomes.

Looked after children

For children who are looked after away from home one of the key principles explicit within the Children Act 1989 is to ensure that close contact with their families is maintained so that children can continue their relationships with their families, and where appropriate be reunited with them as soon as possible.(1). Where children leave care and live independently of their families, family links often remain very important. Research has pointed to the considerable potential of working in partnership with the child and their family during this transitional period (2)

A good part of the information gathered within the process of creating Family Essential Lifestyle Plans could be available to professionals working with families as a part of their comprehensive assessments, and on going direct work with children and their families. The structure and process of creating an Essential Lifestyle Plan enables much richer, fuller information to be gained that reflects the very essence of the family and individuals within it. Used as an organic plan, owned by the family it would complement and enhance good social work interventions, as Sharon a foster carer, and Sarah, a social worker comment:

"Having experienced developing a Family Essential Lifestyle Plan for me and my family I wish we had done this as part of our training and assessment to become foster carers. The information provided for us when a child is placed with us tells us nothing about who the child is, or what is important to and for them. I am going to ask the social worker if the child currently placed with us can be included in our family plan. It would be wonderful if foster carers Family Essential Lifestyle Plans, could be used to match a child to be placed with them, by considering their plan with a child's own plan, to ensure compatibility before a child is placed"

"Family Essential Lifestyle Plans I believe would fit within good social work practice in a number of areas. I can see a particular use within the Looked After system. Continuity of care, and understanding a particular child's needs, wishes, and feelings is something we, as a profession often mess up. It is true that Care Plans and LAC documents are our tools for ensuring needs, wishes and feelings are considered, and to some level these tools are effective. What Family Essential Lifestyle Plans offer however, is a true voice for the child to express what is important to them, from their perspective. For Looked After children this is vitally important because changes of carer bring with that, change in world views, changes in perspectives, expectations, boundaries etc, and most importantly a loss of power for the child, feeling as though the rug is being constantly pulled from under their feet. At least with an Essential Lifestyle Plan it is owned by and created by and with the child.....and goes with them to inform others how that child wishes to be cared for!"

Long term placements and adoption

As with the information process used for Children Looked After, there is wealth of information available for placement services that currently use the information provided to match children with potential adoptive families. Should, as is advocated above for foster carers, both the children and potential adoptive family have the depth of information available within a Family Essential Lifestyle Plan, we believe this would potentially allow for clearer matches, and enhance the child's information currently provided through 'Life Story Books', as Lucy a prospective adoptive parent and Sarah, a social worker, discuss:

"Our social worker collected lots of information from us for his report to panel. If this had been collected and recorded as a Family Essential Lifestyle Plan, then it would have been a shared document and I think, really helpful for people who were involved in the process of matching us with children"



"When considering placing children with substitute carers, or matching them with adopters, using Family Essential Lifestyle Plans of both the prospective adopters and the child would prove ideal as a means of making explicit how a child's needs and wishes could be embraced within a particular family. This initial look at the Plans would help protect against inappropriate matching and all the negative fallout that can come with it such as Placement breakdowns, a child's sense of failure or even tainting a child's reputation with the notion that they are difficult to care for. Additionally when children return home (as most eventually do) an Essential Lifestyle Plan that has been kept up to date and relevant could be of great assistance to the family in understanding the child's changing needs, views and wishes, and thus lead to better prognoses for family stability in the long run.

Health and social services

The work of community based health professionals is to view the child or family member with whom they are working within the context of the whole family. Our experience to date is that although the philosophy of care provides a framework that is essentially person centred, Family Essential Lifestyle Plans provide a structure and opportunity to consider the impact of health strategies on the whole family. Terry, a health visitor, describes how using components of Family Essential Lifestyle Plans made his work richer.

"My initial attempt at using some of the components of Person Centred Planning was with a family who are soon to move out of the area. Three of their children have multiple problems and the family have demonstrated a good deal of perseverance and tenacity in their dealings with a variety of services. In helping the parents to write-up the nature of the services the children need I have been able to incorporate components of Family Essential Lifestyle Plans such as "Positive Reputation," which have captured aspects of the children's personalities, abilities and behaviours that would have been left out of the picture if I had simply focussed on a sort of "Problem -Service" report.



In teasing out the essence of what is important to the children and their family as well as what is important for them, I was able to use the “good day – bad-day” approach which made the report much more meaningful and richer.”

This approach is also important in midwifery, Bernadette, a midwife says:

“Good midwifery practice promotes the provision of care which recognises the client as an individual within the context of their family.

Family Essential Lifestyle Plans can be a valuable tool, employed to compliment and give structure to discussion with clients, to reflect what is important to them and in determining what support is necessary, for them and their family.”

Conclusion

In this paper we have identified some of the potential of using family essential lifestyle plans with children and families using local authority and health services.

We are exploring how person centred approaches can be built into individual and family plans within Sure Start Waterbridge, in East Lancs. These approaches are being used both as direct service interventions, which inform family plans, and within planning for service delivery with children and their families.

We hope that family plans are a practical way of putting what professionals understand about families as systems into everyday ways of working, and that families see this approach as one that recognises and validates the many intricacies of family life, by enabling families to describe them in their own words,



References

1. Department of Health and Social Security (1987) The Law on Child Care and Family Services, para 5, London, HMSO)
2. Marsh P and Peel M (1999) Leaving Care in Partnership: family involvement with care leavers. The Stationery Office, London)

