

5. SWIFT

5.1 Summary of key findings

The project

The project is a highly targeted intervention working with children and parents in school-based multi-family therapy groups, referred to as 'Family Groups'. A therapist and a school-based partner (usually in a pastoral role) run the weekly groups in schools, each attended by up to 8 families. The aim is to reduce the risk of exclusion, increase attendance and support attainment, by working with the whole family. Typically families have complex needs and groups include some extremely vulnerable families.

In a group session, families identify problems that they are dealing with and devise 'targets' to address them. Parents and children work together on an activity designed to develop their reflective skills and promote positive parent-child interaction. Families support each other to work on problems. Children return to class and there is time for parents to discuss, reflect and share advice, ideas and strategies to achieve positive outcomes.

Impacts

Families have very individual circumstances and needs, and therefore impacts vary for each, hence the case study approach of the evaluation. However, there are strong common themes across all. Parent-child relationships are improved because parents feel more confident and empowered in their parental role. Children feel more supported and secure, often leading to improved attendance, behaviour and attainment at school. Schools report improved relationships with parents and children, and fewer disruptions in class.

Facilitators to success

Factors which appear to have contributed to the success of Family Groups include the effective engagement of parents, who can be reluctant and fearful of getting involved with an intervention at all, and the setting of a clear expectation from the outset that parents must be willing to take responsibility for supporting their child and playing a key role in effecting positive change. The group format enables parents to support each other too, providing an opportunity to build trust between the group members so that they can share their problems and mutually develop strategies to tackle them. Finally strong backing of the group by the school is key, to ensure that the progress made in the group sessions is supported in the wider school environment.

Recommendations

The Family Group model is working as intended and is showing extremely positive impacts for children, families and schools, and therefore we do not suggest any substantive change to the approach. However, it is recommended that the project staff maintain a focus on raising awareness of Family Groups throughout the whole school, with a view to embedding the principles more widely. This will enable all school staff to adopt a consistent approach to poor behaviour or attendance, one which seeks to understand and address the causes rather than simply penalising a child for the effects.

A second recommendation is that project staff continue to work on developing clear and formalised mechanisms for supporting families after their 'graduation' from the group, so that they are not left without support. The exit strategy should be tailored to each child and family according to their specific needs.

5.2 Project overview

SWIFT - in collaboration with its partner The School and Family Works (SFW) – aims to work therapeutically and systemically with families at risk, children at risk of exclusion and local schools through its programme of Multi-Family Therapy Groups¹². SWIFT was first established as an extended schools cluster in Hounslow in London, and is managed by a multi-agency board with a reputation for engaging hard to reach families. The Marlborough model of multi-family therapy groups has received national attention, having been endorsed by the former Department of Children, Schools and Families, and has been proven to deliver positive impact on behaviour, exclusion, mental health, academic achievement and parental functioning¹³.

The pilot - which consisted of 4 Family Groups - was shown to be successful in engaging 'families at risk' (i.e. families that experience multiple and complex problems which restrict their life chances, such as poor mental and/or physical health, low income, poor housing, alcohol and drug misuse, domestic abuse, etc¹⁴). The pilots provided some evidence of having reduced exclusions, as well as a number of other positive outcomes for the families involved. Consequently there was a strong appetite among local partners to apply for PHF funding to support the continuation of the model in 2010.

The programme is delivered in two primary schools, through a year 1 and 2 group (infants), and a year 4 and 5 group (juniors), and for students in years 7, 8 and 9 at Feltham Community College. Key elements include:

- Three multi-family therapy groups, bringing up to 8 families (at least one parent and one 'focus child') together.
- A school-based partner (deputy head / SENCO or pastoral lead) co-facilitates the group with the specialist mental health partner from The School and Family Works.
- In initial sessions long-term goals or 'external targets' for the child are agreed. Progress towards these targets is monitored weekly by parent and teacher on a target card, brought to Family Group session for discussion weekly. Additionally 'internal targets' are set in each group session for each child, arising from any difficulties at home or school in the previous week.
- Groups run weekly, in school time, over two hours. In sessions, families identify current problems and devise targets relevant to alleviating these problems. Families then engage in an activity. The facilitating partners use the targets to support families to develop reflective and analytical skills while engaged in the activity. Families support and challenge each other to work on immediate and long-term problems.
- Children return to class and there is 'parent reflection time'. Family Group members offer and are offered strategies on how to manage situations to achieve more positive outcomes and competence. Over time, as trust develops, underlying issues in the childhood experience of the parents themselves are explored and resolved.

¹² See <http://theschoolandfamilyworks.co.uk/our-services/marlborough-multi-family-gr/>

¹³ Asen E, Dawson N, McHugh B: Multiple Family Therapy – the Marlborough Model and its Wider Applications (Karnac, 2001)

¹⁴ See definition of 'families at risk' in Reaching Out: Think Family; Analysis and themes from the Families At Risk Review, Cabinet Office, 2007 <http://www.devon.gov.uk/reachingoutthinkfamily.pdf>

- When the child is consistently scoring high on all long-term targets and all parties – child, parent and school - agree, the child and parent 'graduate' from the group. This change process may take a year.

Intended outcomes for the children and young people include greater emotional well-being, reduced exclusions, improved school attendance and increase educational attainment.

In addition the aim is to support vulnerable families, reduce their sense of isolation, improve relationships between family members, relationships between families, with schools and other services.

Longer-term, it is hoped the programme will impact positively on wider issues such as early entry to the criminal justice system, teenage pregnancy/sex and reduce referrals to CAMHS and social care.

Identifying families

Schools identify families they think will most benefit from this intervention. They will discuss the family with the SFW therapist and then the school or therapist approaches the family to suggest that they take part. In many cases the school and the therapist will work to engage a family over a long period of time before they agree to come to Family Group.

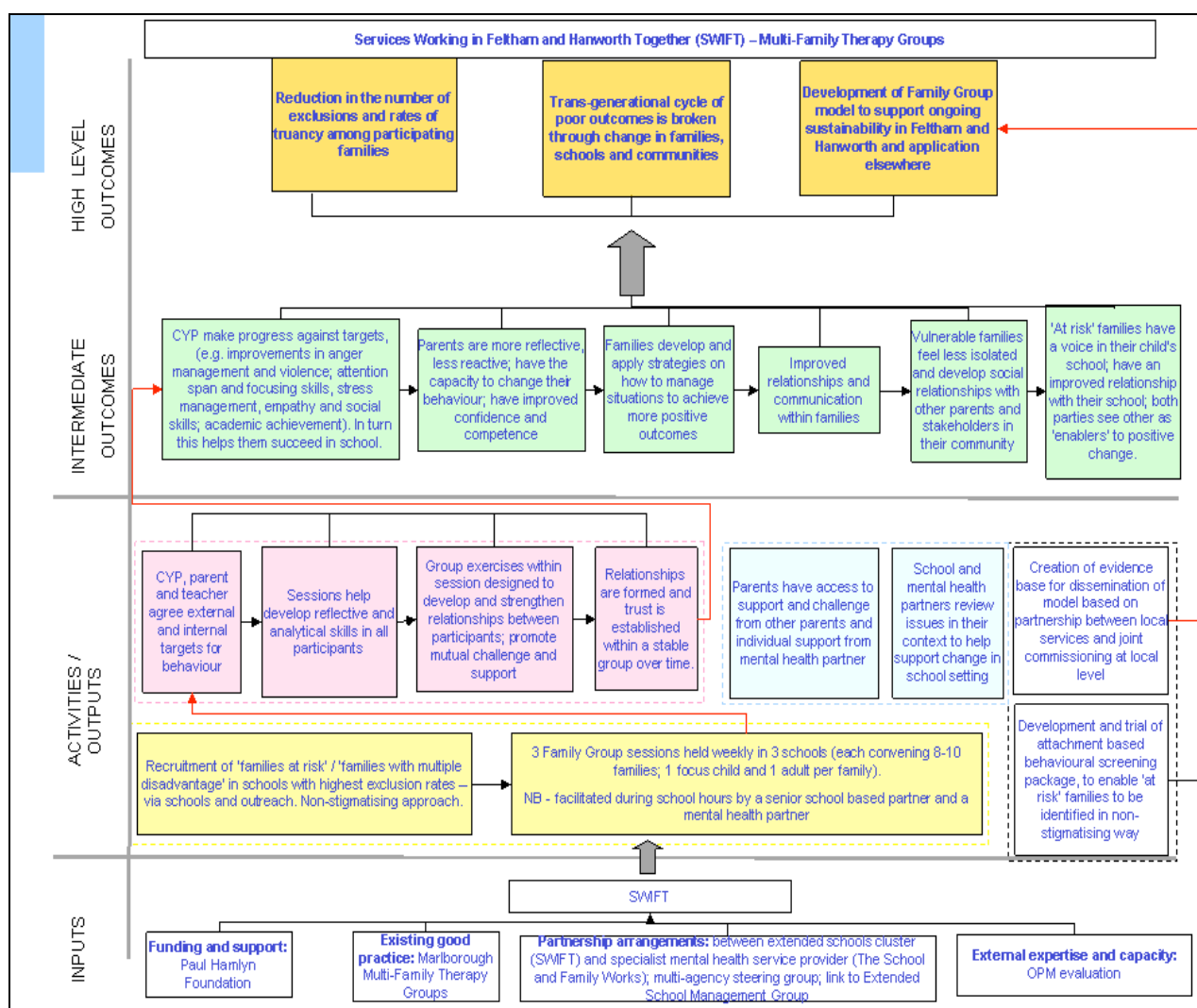
Numbers of families supported this year

Each of the three Family Groups can have up to 8 families at one time. Families may remain in the group for as long as the support is needed, before they 'graduate' from the group (as long as they remain at the school). In the school year 2011-12, eight families joined the secondary school group, five joined the juniors group and five joined the infants group (other places in these groups were occupied by children who joined in the previous year, 2010-11).

5.3 Project learning and adjustments since the scoping phase

The project has been implemented as anticipated, and has stayed true to its original vision and intended processes. Therefore the pathway to outcomes model below remains unchanged from its original version, which was drawn up at the start of the evaluation.

Therapeutic early interventions to prevent school exclusion and truancy: evaluation of three contemporaneous projects



The model is based on the following theories and assumptions:

- The nature of a child's relationship with her/his family or primary carer is one of the most important determinants of educational outcomes.
- Development of neuronal pathways is 'use dependent'¹⁵. The development of new neuronal pathways is facilitated when everyone around the child works together to support new thinking habits.
- Many 'families at risk' are likely to experience problematic relationships – both internally within families, and externally with schools, other services and the wider community.
- Patterns of poor relationships and behaviours are likely to be intergenerational and will repeat themselves unless specialist support services can help break these cycles.
- Schools often have a limited capacity to deal adequately with pupils from 'at risk' families who are challenging or disengaging from school.
- All parties should view each other as equals who have the power to affect positive change. The Family Group model is underlined by a theory of 'co-production' and aims to

¹⁵ Childhood Trauma, the Neurobiology of Adaptation & Use-dependent Development of the Brain: How States become Traits by Bruce D. Perry.

- break down patterns of mutual distrust and blame
- focus on commonalities, e.g. that everyone wants what is best for the child
- empower children, young people, parents and professionals who may feel disempowered by negative cycles of behaviours and outcomes
- develop positive relationships between children, parents, schools and wider support networks in the community, while also enhancing ‘reflective capacity’ within families and services – so they are empowered to understand problems, and use this insight to effect change.

5.4 Impact

This section presents the evaluation findings in relation to impact. Along with truancy and exclusion data, and a summary of the project’s impact, it provides six detailed case studies – two from each of the three Family Groups – covering a secondary school, a junior school, and an infant school. Five of the case studies appear in this report. At the time of writing, we are still awaiting ‘sign off’ of the sixth case study from the family involved.

A case study approach was decided upon due to the small number of families involved in the intervention and the very different nature of their needs. The case studies aim to illustrate the range of experiences and issues that families bring to Family Group. The families face very different and often complex challenges; what they have in common is that they are supported to deal with these by Family Group and generally report very positive experiences and impacts of Family Group. Each case study also aims to demonstrate the interrelated nature of a child’s success at school with the stability and competence of the parenting they receive.

Case study families were selected in order to showcase a range in terms of the age of children, the nature of the family situation and the nature of the child’s issues at school. Choosing from a relatively small sample of families, the selection was also necessarily informed by families’ willingness to participate, and their availability on the day of the first fieldwork visit. It is positive to note that all families were willing to take part in the research, which may be seen to reflect the widespread positive attitude towards Family Group amongst those who belong to it.

Truancy and exclusion data

This section gives data on levels of exclusion and attendance for the Family Group children.

Please note the following important information when reading this section:

- Because Family Group is a highly targeted intervention, involving only a small number of children in the school, we would not expect to see any notable impact on levels of truancy and exclusion at the whole-school level.
- At individual child level, it is important to note that each child has a particular set of circumstances affecting their attendance and exclusion figures and they should be interpreted in this context.

It is necessary to bear in mind when reading the figures that negative outcomes, i.e. decreases in attendance or increases in exclusions, are not unexpected in the context of these families’ changing circumstances and needs. Upheavals such as changes in housing situation, parental relationship status, parental mental health, a parental prison sentence or release can cause serious setbacks for children, which can affect their ability to attend school and their capacity to avoid the kind of situations that can lead to

exclusion. It is likely that were they not receiving support via Family Group, the figures may reflect a poorer-still picture for these children.

It is not possible to describe the context of each family here, but for example, one child was taken out of school to go on holiday, which was recorded by the school as an unauthorised absence; however, the willingness of the child's carer to take him on holiday reflected a vast improvement in their relationship, which is a positive outcome.

This example is given in order to illustrate the complexity of the circumstances of each family involved and the very individual and differing nature of 'positive' outcomes for each.

- Family Group runs in three schools: infants, junior and secondary. As noted in the policy section of this report, therapeutic interventions have been evidenced to be less effective in secondary settings because of the generally higher level of need. Therefore we would not expect Family Group to show comparable effects at both primary and secondary levels.

Note on the figures presented:

- Some whole-school figures are provided in this section for information, but the key figures are those for Family Group children.
- All data for the school year 2011-12 is for the start of the year in September 2011 up until early/mid May 2012.
- It should be noted that data was supplied in different formats by the schools involved due to their different systems of recording such data.
- Data is not available for all Family Group children, for example for those who have only joined the school shortly before joining Family Group.

Secondary school

Secondary: summary

- A slightly higher number of children in Family Group received exclusions in 2011/12 than in 2010/11 (four compared to two) but the total number of days lost to exclusion was less.
- Unauthorised absences fell: the number of unauthorised absences recorded since joining Family Group was lower than the number recorded for the previous year, for each child for whom this data was available.

Exclusions

Amongst Family Group children,

- in 2010-11:
 - Six out of 8 children had no exclusions
 - One child had 3 exclusions, totalling 11 days
 - One child had 2 exclusions, totalling 29 days, and then left the school in a managed transfer (this child attended Family Group on only two occasions before leaving the school).
- in 2011-12:
 - Three out of the remaining 7 children had no exclusions

- Three children each had 2 exclusions, totalling 26 days
- One child had 1 exclusion, totalling 1 day

It should be noted that some exclusions in 2011/12 occurred only shortly after a child joining Family Group, before the intervention would have been expected to have an impact.

It was reported by SFW that in the control group identified by SFW (which does not form part of this evaluation), 4 out of 8 children have been permanently excluded from the school.

It was the headteacher's view that a number of children who have been involved in Family Group (in the most recent and in previous cohorts) may have had to leave the school were it not for the intervention of Family Group.

In the whole school (data for years 7-9 only because these are the year groups eligible to be in Family Group),

- in 2010-11 there were 110 incidences of exclusion (over the whole school year)
- in 2011-12 there were 22 incidences of exclusion (from September 2011 to start of May 2012)

Attendance

The table below shows the number of half days of **unauthorised absence** for each child, in the year prior to joining Family Group, and since joining Family Group. Data was available for 4 of the children who joined in 2011/12¹⁶.

Child	No. unauthorised absences in year <i>prior</i> to joining Family Group (half days)	No. unauthorised absences in year <i>since</i> joining Family Group (half days)
Family Group child 1	18	3 (joined autumn term)
Family Group child 2	83	27 (joined autumn term)
Family Group child 3	1	0 (joined winter term)
Family Group child 4	4	3 (joined winter term)

All of the children for whom data is available show a reduction in unauthorised absences, some to a very considerable extent.

Junior school

Juniors: summary

- Dramatic fall in days lost to exclusion: the number of days lost to exclusion dropped dramatically in 2011-12 compared to previous years. Since most of the days lost related to Family Group children, the difference is likely to be attributable to the Family Group intervention.
- Levels of attendance remained fairly stable for the majority of children.

¹⁶ Two of the other children in this year started Family Group in year 7, i.e. the first year of secondary school, so there is no attendance data available preceding this.

Exclusions

Amongst Family Group children,

- in 2010-11:
 - Five out of 12 children had no exclusions
 - One child had 4 exclusions, totalling 11 days
 - One child had 2 exclusions, totalling 8 days
 - Four children each had 1 exclusion, totalling 7 days
 - One child had 2 exclusions, totalling 47 days leading up to a managed transfer.
- in 2011-12:
 - Three children had left the school
 - Eight children had no exclusions
 - One child had 3 exclusions, totalling 7 days
 - One child had 1 exclusion, totalling 1.5 days

In the whole school,

- in 2010-11 there were 39 days of exclusions, of which 28 days were Family Group children (whole year)¹⁷
- in 2011-12 there were 8.5 days of exclusions, of which all were Family Group children (up to 17 May 2012)

The majority of days lost to exclusion in 2010-11 concerned children who would go on to join Family Group in 2011-12. Therefore the dramatic drop in days lost to exclusion in 2011-12 may very well be attributable to the intervention.

Attendance

Data for Family Group children in the junior school shows the percentage of sessions (i.e. school days) attended in each year. Data was available for 12 children who joined Family Group between 2010 and 2011¹⁸. The table below shows the date they joined and the **percentage of sessions attended** in the year(s) since.

¹⁷ This does not include 45 days lost to exclusion by one child in the lead up to a managed transfer

¹⁸ Children who joined in 2012 are not included in this table, as it would be too soon to see any impact on their attendance

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Child	Date joined Family Group	% attendance 2010-11	% attendance 2010-11	% attendance 2011-12¹⁹
Family Group child 1	Dec 2010	85%	86%	left
Family Group child 2	Dec 2010	90%	90%	left
Family Group child 3	Dec 2010	90%	88%	left
Family Group child 4	Dec 2010	85%	93%	88%
Family Group child 5	Dec 2010	92%	95%	left
Family Group child 6	Dec 2010	93%	88%	97%
Family Group child 7	June 2011	No data	98%	96%
Family Group child 8	June 2011	96%	96%	left
Family Group child 9	June 2011	No data	97%	98%
Family Group child 10	July 2011	No data	94%	88%
Family Group child 11	Sept 2011	No data	93%	92%
Family Group child 12	Sept 2011	No data	91%	92%

The data shows that for the majority of children their attendance varied only slightly from one year to the next.

These figures do not show what proportion of missed sessions are authorised, as opposed to unauthorised, absences. It is likely that unauthorised absences have reduced because of Family Group, while authorised absences may have increased due to other causes e.g. illness.

This breakdown of the data should be collected next year in order to give a fuller picture of each child's attendance.

¹⁹ Figures cover the period from the start of autumn term 2011 up to 10 May 2012

Infant school

Infants: summary

- There were very few days lost to exclusion either before or during the Family Group intervention. There were no exclusions relating to Family Group children. School staff consider that the Family Group is likely have a preventative effect in terms of future exclusions.
- Levels of attendance remained fairly stable for the majority of children.

Exclusions

Amongst Family Group children, there were no exclusions.

In the whole school,

- in 2010-11:
 - One child received 2 exclusions, totalling 3 days
- in 2011-12
 - One child received 1 exclusion, totalling 1 day

Staff feel that the project is acting preventatively for the children involved - helping to avoid potential exclusions in the future, by helping families to become more able to cope with their challenges, and more positively engaged with the school and with education.

Attendance

As for the junior school, data for Family Group children in the infants school shows the percentage of sessions (i.e. school days) attended in each year. Data was available for 10 children who joined Family Group between 2010 and 2011²⁰. The following table shows the date they joined and the **percentage of sessions attended** in the year(s) since.

²⁰ Children who joined in 2012 are not included in this table, as it would be too soon to see any impact on their attendance

Child	Date joined Family Group	% attendance 2010-11	% attendance 2011-12 ²¹
Family Group child 1	Nov 2010	89%	90%
Family Group child 2	Nov 2010	98%	96%
Family Group child 3	Nov 2010 (graduated Jul 2011)	99%	94%
Family Group child 4	Nov 2010	100%	99%
Family Group child 5	Nov 2010 (graduated Jul 2011)	90%	90%
Family Group child 6	Nov 2010	91%	89%
Family Group child 7	Jan 2011	90%	85%
Family Group child 8	Sept 2011	89%	92%*
Family Group child 9	Nov 2011	86%	76%
Family Group child 10	Nov 2011	92%	90%*

As above, in relation to the junior school, the data in this table shows that for the majority of children their attendance did not vary dramatically from one year to the next. Again, it should be noted that the figures do not distinguish between authorised and unauthorised absences; this data should be collected in future.

Summary of the project's wider impacts

Children and young people

Family Group helps to increase self-esteem and confidence of children and young people by listening to them and seeking solutions to their problems. Attending Family Group helps children and young people to:

- recognise their feelings, fears and anxieties
- have the language to articulate these feelings
- feel that they are heard and understood
- feel supported
- feel safe.

For example, a child who had a lot of anxiety around her mother's mental health has been able to talk about this, and now feels safer and more secure in the knowledge that her mother is being supported by Family Group.

²¹ Figures cover the period from the start of autumn term 2011 up to 4 or 28* May 2012

Many of the children have built up a negative 'reputation' at school, and feel frustrated and 'wronged' by the school's response to them. Being able to explain their feelings means they do not have to act them out in the form of bad behaviour, which improves their relationships with the school.

More security and less conflict with their parents and school means that children are more free to focus on learning and attainment. An independent report for SFW produced by So What? in January 2012²² measured the attainment progress of Family Group children, and concluded that while generally starting from a lower point than their peers they were 'catching up' with the rest of the school and making somewhat faster progress than their peers. It is important to recognise that this conclusion is based on limited data so far but it is a positive early indication of the potential impact of Family Group on attainment and data will continue to be collected and analysed in order to increase statistical robustness.

Parents

Parents experience many of the impacts described above in relation to children and young people: they are better able to identify and talk about their feelings and concerns, and also benefit from being listened to, and responded to positively rather than critically.

A key impact of Family Group on parents is to make them feel empowered to play their parental role. This involves recognising their responsibility as a parent to provide safety and security to their child, in order to help the child tolerate anxiety, and modelling positive attitudes and behaviours to their child.

Parents are also empowered to deal with other services such as the educational system, in order to access the support that they or their child (whether the focus child in Family Group, or their sibling) may need. This empowerment comes from having both increased knowledge of what services and resources they are entitled to, and increased confidence to do so because of the support of the therapist and of other parents in the group. For example, one of the parents has been able to get her son (the sibling of the focus child in Family Group) into a different school that can provide the SEN support he needs. With the child in an appropriate school environment, his anxiety is reduced, his dependence on his mother is reduced, and she is freed up to spend more time with her daughter (the focus child in Family Group).

An incident in one of the Family Groups illustrates the value that parents place on the intervention. A breach of confidentiality occurred, which meant that one of the members of the group must have disclosed information that was shared confidentially within the group. The SFW therapists considered that this had the potential to be extremely divisive; however, parents were determined that the incident should not be allowed to threaten the dynamics of Family Group. This response to the incident turned it into an affirming rather than a destructive event and, with carefully-managed discussion, reinforced the commitment of members to the Family Group's underpinning principle of confidentiality.

Families

A family approach can be particularly impactful in families with complex needs and in which there have been generations of dysfunctional parenting. While it is too soon to measure the success of the intervention in the long term, there is optimism about its potential, because for

²² Marlborough Multi Family Therapy Groups Preliminary Attainment Results, So What? Research Ltd, 27 January 2012

parents who have not had good parenting modelled to them by their own parents, Family Group works to give them the techniques and the confidence to prevent them from repeating those failures. A headteacher explained:

'I think it is making a real difference with those families and it will make a difference even with the next generation. It's hard to see because it's not always immediate. But when these children become parents themselves they will have this experience to have learned from and to know how to have a positive relationship. And that's what's needed. It's breaking the cycle of generational failure.'

Schools

SFW has excellent relationships with the three schools in which the Family Groups are run; the project manager feels that the groups are well-embedded in the schools, and attributes this to the fact that Family Group fills a gap which schools cannot address themselves or through other agencies.

How schools understand and interpret children's behaviour has also been affected, which has implications for the way in which they respond to it:

'There is a greater understanding in schools that behaviour has a meaning...that behaviour that seems incomprehensible can be understood, and from there it can be addressed.' (SFW project manager)

Unsurprisingly, those school staff who are more closely involved with the programme - heads, school-based partners, staff who have direct contact with the individual child concerned - have the strongest awareness and buy-in to it. However, in the two primary schools in particular, this is more widespread amongst staff, and has been brought about by whole-school training delivered by SFW on INSET days, by the role of the school-based partner who communicates the activities and purpose of Family Group around the school, by the visibility of the group taking place in a small school, and by the target cards which teachers have to sign. In the secondary school, awareness is less consistent throughout the school, by dint of the size of the school and number of staff.

Schools report improved relationships with parents in the Family Group (although it should be noted that these relationships are not always problematic beforehand); and with the parent body more widely. This is because parents recognise that the school is willing and wants to engage with families and children who present 'difficulties', and that they can hold confidentiality, removing parents' fear of being open about their issues. In the smaller schools in particular, Family Group is gaining a positive reputation, as the children and parents who attend talk about it to others, which makes it easier for schools to engage new parents in the group (as compared to initially when there was often reluctance and trepidation amongst those parents approached by the school about joining).

Other organisations

The SFW project manager reports that professionals from other services have become strong advocates for Family Group, including those from the Early Intervention Service. Family Group is seen by them as addressing the gap above Tier 2 provision and reducing the level of need which families experience. A number of Family Group members have an improved relationship with social services and CAMHS, because they are able to interact with these services in a more empowered way: they know what to ask for and have the confidence to do so.

Case study 1: Emily and Angela

Emily and Angela: summary

Emily was truanting, engaging in high risk behaviour and failing to achieve academically. She had received 5 temporary exclusions. Her relationship with mum Angela was under strain.

Now, the truanting has stopped and Emily is preparing for her GCSEs and looking to the future. Her relationship with Angela is much improved because they are listening and talking to each other more. Angela is focusing more on Emily's needs.

Emily is in year 9. She attends Family Group with her mother Angela. Angela is a single parent to Emily and her younger brother Jack, who is 9 and has additional needs including ADHD and autism. Emily and Angela started coming to Family Group in September 2011.

Before Family Group

The school started to be aware of problems towards the end of year 7, when Emily got in with the 'wrong group'. Emily was truanting with this group of friends and they were involved in some high risk behaviours, including sexual activity. When she did attend school, Emily was confrontational and hard to deal with, for example refusing to comply with uniform, and was also 'massively underachieving' academically. The headteacher described the situation:

'Even if she was not going to be permanently excluded by the school, she was at risk of excluding herself totally from education in any mainstream successful way.'

Angela was very willing to work with the school and tried hard to put in boundaries for Emily, but despite her best intentions, she but didn't know how to enforce them. The Head thought it was quite common for single parents particularly to fear that they might in some way 'lose' their child if they do not keep them on side – which makes it hard for them to put in boundaries and realise that being consistently strict is the most caring thing they can do.

Although the school was not aware of this at the time, it emerged during Family Group that Angela had suffered from post-natal depression and that Emily had spent some time being cared by a grandparent. A further challenging aspect of the family's situation is the attention demanded of Angela by her son Jack because of his special needs. Both of these circumstances meant that Emily was not receiving the level of emotional energy and care that she needed from Angela.

Before they started going to the Family Group, Emily had been temporarily excluded from the school five times, and she was very close to being excluded permanently. Emily had had many meetings with the pastoral worker, and Angela with the Head. But it was not having an impact. The support was needed holistically – the school could only put on 'sticking plasters'.

Because Angela was so willing, Family Group seemed like a promising option. The Head wanted firstly to keep Emily in school, i.e. avoid permanent exclusion; to stop her involvement in high risk behaviours; to get her to buy in to the value of education and to see that she could be successful at school; and to try and safeguard Emily and Angela's relationship against breaking down.

At Family Group

Both Emily and Angela enjoy going to the group, as it means they get to spend time together, which is hard at home because of Emily's brother Jack, as Angela explained:

'At home, you don't always have time if you've got other children who need your attention. It's nice to have that one-to-one with Emily because at home that's difficult because of her attention-seeking brother.'

They also like working with a different parent or child. Both feel at ease with everyone in the group, having been working with them for a while.

The setting of targets is a useful process because it provides a structure for talking through Emily's issues and crystallising what they are and what can be done about them. Throughout the session and the week, the targets remind Emily of what she needs to do; for example, 'express yourself', 'listen to adults' instructions' and 'present yourself perfectly'. She doesn't always remember them, but Angela thinks that they do make a difference to some extent. It also gives Emily a way to show Angela and the group how well she has done and an opportunity to enjoy their praise.

The group format works for Angela by making reassuring her that she is not the only parent with problems:

'You realise that there's other families with problems the same as you. Because when there's all this going on in your home you feel really stressed and like, it's only happening to you – but it's not. It helps me to get by, to remember that there are people out there with worse problems than me. It's good to know you're not in it on your own.'

As well as the support of other parents, Angela appreciates the support of the therapist and the school based partner, as does Emily. They particularly like how the school-based partner acts as a link between group and school, as Emily explained:

'She knows everyone's targets so she will know if you've been good and focused on your targets and she can tell the group.'

In terms of possible improvements to the group, Angela simply thought there should be more groups so that more families could benefit, while Emily wished they had more time in each session:

'The talking part at the beginning, that's important, and there used to be just like three of us so we could spend 20 minutes on each person, but now there's loads of us we only have a few minutes.'

Outcomes for the child

Overall, the difference for Emily has been dramatic, as the school has told Angela:

'They have said it's a tremendous change and she's turned everything around, so I know she's doing well. I'm pleased, [the therapist] is pleased, the school's pleased.'

The head too believes that Family Group has rescued Emily from the brink:

'If she hadn't gone to Family Group, I don't think she would still be here, if I'm honest. I don't think she saw a way back either really. As much as she would sit here and say yes to her mum... you knew it wouldn't stick.'

Some of the specific changes for Emily are set out below.

Improvements at school

- According to Emily and to the headteacher, Emily's behaviour and attainment have improved vastly; she is no longer getting detentions for messing around in class, arguing

and backchat to teachers and getting distracted. This has helped her to concentrate better in class, and to improve her marks:

'I used to be in detention nearly every day but now I don't really get detentions any more. My teachers always tell me how well I'm doing in lessons compared to how I used to do.'

- Attendance and punctuality have also improved dramatically. The truancy has stopped, and while punctuality is not perfect, these days Emily is late for school occasionally, rather than every day.
- Emily's uniform is '90% better', according to the Head. It used to be that she would hardly wear any of her uniform, but now she wears most of it.
- Emily feels better towards the school and her teachers. She is aware that the way she is perceived by others has changed for the better. Previously she felt that she was labelled as the troublemaker, and this was very upsetting to her. Now, she feels that she is respected by teachers:

'Before, people had a bad view of me, in class... they don't any more. I don't have that reputation.'

The head also recognised that Emily was feeling more positive towards staff:

'She seems to be smilier, she will look you in the eye, around school.'

Improvements at home

At home, Emily is more aware of and considerate of Angela's feelings now; for example before Family Group she would come home late without calling Angela to let her know; it didn't occur to her that Angela would be worried. Now she realises that her actions affect other people and she will ring Angela to say where she is. This example reflects a significant change for Emily, which is that she now has a sense of responsibility for herself and her actions.

Outcomes for the parent

Angela has always been engaged with the school and wanted to do her best for Emily, even before Family Group:

'They [school] know that I'm a really supportive parent and that whatever is needed, I'm there.'

Family Group has been able to help Angela to help Emily in a way that the school alone could not, by working out what the real issues were and finding solutions to them.

Better at listening

Angela is better at listening now. At first she would talk a lot in the group, sometimes not letting others, including Emily, have their say. But this has improved, with Emily confirming that her mother *'hardly speaks at all now! You should speak more!'* It was notable during the interviews for this case study that on the first visit, Angela tended to respond to questions without allowing time for Emily to talk; on the second visit, Emily had more chance to give her own views.

More focus on Emily

Family Group has helped Angela to understand that Emily has not been getting enough attention because of Jack's needs, and that this may have played a part in her troubling behaviour.

'My boy's got special needs so he needs my full attention. Emily's a completely different kid, she doesn't have special needs, she's an extremely bright and intelligent kid, so they're completely on different levels. So all his life it's been about him, and through the group I've come to understand how Emily gets a bit frustrated and upset, and pulls away from me in certain ways, because she sees her brother getting all this attention.

And I don't know, but I wondered if when Emily went through this bad patch and we had to start coming to the group, maybe it was her way of getting my attention. I don't know. I felt that I wasn't giving her enough love in her life. I had pushed her out to a degree. Not on purpose! Because I love both my kids the same. But I hadn't realised I was doing it - and since coming to group I have seen that it is an issue, because Emily needs my attention as well.'

The therapist has helped Angela to get her son Jack into a special school, and the expectation is that with Jack in a more appropriate environment, getting the support he needs, Angela will be freed up to give more time to Emily.

Through spending time together which is focused on Emily and her needs and feelings, Angela and Emily have grown closer, as Angela has realised that both of her children need her time and attention, as well as her love:

'I give my kids more time now. They've always been number one, but even more so now. They are all I care about in my life and that's why I give them all the support and everything I can give them.'

A mother and a role model for Emily

Angela says that one of the key impacts of the group on her has been to increase her awareness of her role as a parent, and help her think of herself as a role model for her children:

'It has changed me a lot. The group made me see how things were. It helps you to see yourself.'

The school-based partner has also seen this change in Angela: at the start of the group, she behaved towards Emily like a friend, and through Family Group their relationship has become more 'natural': more the mother-child relationship which Emily needs.

Outcomes for the school

Improved relationship between school and family

While Angela has always been willing to engage with the school, she feels that communications are now more positive:

'Since all this, the communication with the whole school is better – I feel more part of the school and like I can talk to the Head and Deputy Head. People [staff] come up to me and go, 'oh it's good you're in the group', they all seemed to know and they think it's good! And it means I can talk to them for 10 minutes, when I need to - it's just easy.'

The head agrees that the character of her interactions with Angela and Emily has been transformed:

'It's great, I can just go up to Angela if I see her around and say hello, how are you, how are things going – it's a brief, positive, natural interaction instead of her coming into my office.'

'I also haven't seen Emily in my office – instead I see her around school and just say how are you doing Emily, and again it's a positive interaction.'

Wider benefits for the school

The nature of Emily's behaviour in the classroom meant that she did not necessarily cause a huge amount of distraction for others (she tended to just not do her work, rather than necessarily playing up and disrupting others), therefore the difference to the running of classes has not been marked. However, there have been knock-on effects for other children from Emily's improved behaviour. The head explained how targeting individuals like Emily helps protect other children from getting drawn into bad habits:

'That type of behaviour, particularly truanting, is a bit like a virus in the school – it can draw other people into it and it's not good and not healthy for the school at all. Particularly vulnerable people can get sucked into it quite quickly and they find it difficult to break out of. And the more widespread it is, the more difficult it is to deal with as a school.'

'So you do need to work very hard to stop it and make sure it is not allowed to become part of the school culture. So working with people like Emily helps to protect quite a lot of other people.'

The future

When the researcher visited the school for the second time, in early May, it had been decided that Emily and Angela would graduate from the Family Group before the end of the school year. They said they would miss the sessions and both have some anxiety about how they will cope without it. The school-based partner described Emily's anxiety that without the regular support of Family Group, her mother may struggle to keep up the parenting role which they have developed over the past year and the risk that their relationship may slip back into its previous form, in which Angela was more like a friend than a mother and in which Jack dominates Angela's attention. However, Angela seemed to be alert to the need to keep Emily close, and to check how she is feeling. The school is also aware of the need to continue monitoring and supporting Emily, and the school-based partner will have one-to-ones with her and phone Angela to keep in touch.

Bearing in mind the need for continuing support, everyone felt that the progress the family has made will stand them in better stead as Emily starts work on her GCSE years. While she is anxious about the academic challenges ahead, she is significantly more engaged with learning than may have been the case had the family not become involved with Family Group. Having previously thought about working in childcare, Emily has more recently had the idea of going into social work or other supportive work with children, inspired by her own experiences of this type of support and encouraged by the school to set her sights high. She is thinking positively about her future.

Case study 2: Lindsay and Natalie

Lindsay and Natalie: summary

Lindsay's behaviour at school was 'out of control'; she was angry, disruptive and mistrustful. At home Lindsay and her mum argued all the time. There was a history of domestic violence in the family, with Natalie's former partner in prison for this reason. With her current partner also in prison, Natalie was struggling to cope.

Now, Lindsay and Natalie are getting on better because they have learned to listen and try to see each other's perspectives. Lindsay is behaving better at school and showing a sense of pride in her achievements. Natalie is more aware of her own issues and is working on these instead of 'blaming' Lindsay.

Lindsay is 9 and in year 5 at primary school. She attends Family Group with her mother Natalie, who is 28 and a single mother to Lindsay. She also has five younger children (two of whom share a dad with Lindsay, while the younger three have a different dad). Natalie and Lindsay were originally referred to Family Group in the summer term 2011, and began attending Family Group in September 2011²³.

Before Family Group

Natalie's current partner and the father of her three younger children is currently in prison. Her previous partner, Lindsay's father, is also in prison, for domestic violence offences against Natalie involving firearms. He is due to be released this year and when this happens, the family will be re-housed out of the area in order to prevent him from contacting them. As well as this more recent experience of abuse, there was a history of abuse in Natalie's family when she herself was a child. Against this challenging background and as a young single mother of six, Natalie finds it difficult to divide her time between all her children. Before Family Group, she and Lindsay argued a lot. They would frequently 'shout and scream' at each other, without getting to the bottom of why Lindsay was upset.

At school, Lindsay was heading towards exclusion. Her behaviour was out of control and she often argued with other girls in her class. She disliked her teacher and disliked school. The school-based partner described Lindsay as someone who '*expected everyone to be out to get her*' and who very distrustful – characteristics that were very similar to her mother's. She felt that she always got the blame for any kind of disruption in the class. She also found it difficult to deal with new activities and changes in routine in the classroom, and therefore often had to be sent out of the class.

Due to these issues, the school identified Lindsay as being at risk of exclusion and recommended that she should join Family Group. After a hesitant start, attending two sessions in the summer of 2011, the family started attending regularly in September. Natalie wanted to attend Family Group in order to try and improve Lindsay's attitude at school, and address the arguing at home by enabling her and Lindsay to communicate more effectively with each other:

²³ Natalie was not available for interview in the second round of fieldwork in May; however Lindsay and school staff were interviewed at this time.

'I hoped it would bring us closer so that we could understand each other better. I also wanted her to talk to me more because we weren't listening to each other. We needed it.'

At Family Group

Both Natalie and Lindsay enjoy the 'what's hot and what's not' part of the session, where they can reflect on Lindsay's internal targets and her behaviour throughout the week. Family Group is an environment where they have to listen to each other - instead of arguing as they might do at home - which means that they get to hear each other's perspectives. Natalie finds this helpful because:

'It helps us both with our behaviour, I can see what she's (Lindsay's) saying.'

Lindsay enjoys having the targets and being able to show how well she is doing on them. For her, one of the other key benefits of Family Group is having the opportunity to spend time with her mum - not always easy at home with five younger siblings. While Lindsay likes the group overall, and is happy with sharing her feelings in front of the other members, she felt that one drawback of the group format was that the other children do not always take the group seriously:

'It's all good apart from the other kids there, sometimes they mess around and like, not take it seriously.'

For Natalie, parent time helps in several ways:

- In practical terms she finds that the parents are a strong source of help and advice for each other, drawing on their collective experience. Many of them have gone through similar problems, which helped Natalie to realise that she was not alone in having challenges to deal with in terms of her child's experiences at school. Lindsay's problems at school were the first that Natalie had encountered with any of her children, and because of this she *'just didn't know what to do'*. The benefits of bringing parents together in a group were also recognised by the school-based partner:

'The support they give to each other is phenomenal. The discussions that we've had have all ranged about the domestic violence, abuse, and look at the families now. Now she's (Natalie) in a group, it feels like they have some solidarity.'

- Natalie also values the support that she has received from the therapist, both in the group and one-to-one. Because her relationship with the school is not an easy one, she values the fact that the therapist is an external person rather than a member of school staff. She feels that the therapist avoids 'judging' the parents, which means that they can speak openly, and be open to accepting his advice:

'He's really helpful, there to talk to us and give us advice; he understands us and doesn't judge us.'

Beyond the general facilitation of the group, the therapist has helped Natalie to prepare for the significant upheaval of the family's move outside of Feltham, which will take place on the release of her former partner from prison. She has lived in Feltham all her life and may be seen as being involved in a cycle common to families in the area, who suffer from complex and persistent problems. Family Group has been instrumental in giving Natalie the practical advice, ideas and confidence she needs to undertake the move, and to make it a real opportunity for her family to start afresh.

Outcomes for the child

Improved relationship between Lindsay and Natalie

Before Family Group, if Lindsay had had a bad day at school, or got into a fight, she was unable to tell Natalie calmly why she was upset. Instead, she would express her distress by shouting, crying and having a tantrum. Since attending Family Group, this has changed, as Natalie explained:

'She talks to me more, whereas before her attitude was disgusting. Her behaviour at school has got better, she's like a different child. We still have our ups and downs but it's brought us closer.'

Lindsay agreed that things had improved between her and Natalie:

'Yeah, I have a better relationship with my mum and we talk more than before.'

However, this is very much a work in progress, with the competition for Natalie's attention at home still ongoing and Lindsay feeling that her siblings still 'get their way more' and are 'more spoilt' than her. She is aware that talking about her feelings can help but still finds it difficult to adopt this new habit:

'Sometimes my brother and sisters annoy me and I answer back. I try and talk about how I feel but it's a bit hard because I am not used to it.'

Going forward, Lindsay wants to continue attending Family Group in order to spend more time with Natalie, reflecting that this remains one of her key needs.

Improved behaviour and attainment at school

Lindsay has progressed well on her targets, which have included over the course of the year not to swear, not over-react and to follow adults' instructions. Lindsay felt that she was performing better at school because of her targets; because she is involved in setting them, she feels a sense of ownership and responsibility for achieving them; and they remind her that *'I needed to be good'*. Lindsay's class teacher also recognised how much Lindsay enjoyed her targets, reporting that Lindsay asks for her scores with a sense of pride, and is happy to be the *'star of the day'*.

According to the teacher, Lindsay has *'completely changed'* since starting to attend Family Group. Before, their relationship was very poor, and there were occasions where Lindsay would be crying and screaming on the floor of the toilets, saying that she 'hated' her teacher. This situation has turned around, as the teacher described:

'Now she makes me cards, does extra projects, she is very interested in her school work. She is focused on what she is doing and she likes her targets, they are helpful. She always wants to be star of the day and now she listen to me. When she has a problem in the classroom, we can talk about it together, what we can do to resolve it. She feels that she can trust me now. She's an absolute pleasure in the classroom.'

Lindsay can now take on constructive criticism around her work and is happy to go away and improve something, which would have not happened before. The teacher feels that a lot of this change can be attributed to Family Group, where Lindsay has learned a lot about how to communicate.

Improvements in Lindsay's behaviour and her relationship with her teacher have helped her to improve academically and to raise her aspirations, as the school-based partner observed:

'Because of her behaviour issues she had not been fully focused but has now caught up academically, she is back on track to where we should be...hopefully have more aspiration for herself.'

The school-based partner felt that Natalie's attendance at Family Group had helped to demonstrate to Lindsay her mum's commitment to her, and give a strong message that she wants Lindsay to behave and achieve at school.

Improved relationships with other children

Lindsay is keen to please and is kind to the other children in the group, the school-based partner observed. She brings them tissues if they are upset and offers to get them a drink, as she does not like to see them upset. He complimented Lindsay's improvements at school overall:

'All round, she has improved - emotionally, academically and her behaviour.'

Outcomes for the parent

A better parent and more self-aware

All parties felt that Natalie is dedicated to coming along to Family Group and has improved in the way that she interacts with Lindsay: she is better at listening and communicating, which means that arguments are less likely to start and escalate. Instead of the sister-type relationship that she and Lindsay shared before, as reported by the school-based partner, Natalie now takes control and is more able to be a parent to Lindsay.

Natalie felt she was better able to recognize the areas where she needed to change her own behaviour, rather than seeing the problems as being all about Lindsay:

'I am an angry person and before I lashed out all of the time... but now I can talk to the therapist about stuff and he can give us advice.'

Underlying issues

Those running the Family Group (therapist and school-based partner) felt that Natalie still had a long way to go in terms of acknowledging and working on her own issues:

'There are still a lot of issues there and we haven't got to the bottom of it with Natalie yet.'

They felt that while Lindsay was doing well at school, the number of complex issues within the family, relating to Natalie's childhood abuse experiences and her relationships with partners, would take a long time to unpack.

Current challenges

At the time of the second interviews (in May 2012), Natalie's underlying anxieties about the proposed release of Lindsay's father had become overwhelming, such that she felt unable to leave her house. Contact with her current partner had reduced due to him having being moved to a less accessible prison. Natalie and the rest of the family were experiencing considerable turmoil and distress because of this, and Natalie had not felt able to attend family group for four weeks.

Outcomes for the school

Improved relationships between the school and family

The school has a better relationship with Lindsay and with Natalie. The school-based partner reported that Natalie is now more likely to come to him when she has a problem. Lindsay's class teacher reported that she has had only positive interactions with Natalie. Previously, as noted above, Natalie did not always have a positive relationship with the school and often took a negative view of the teachers. This long-held view is taking time to change, but it has started to do so:

'We all know that teachers have their favourites, but yeah, I would say it was getting a bit better.'

The future for Lindsay and Natalie

At the time of the second visit, Natalie's sister-in-law was standing in for her so that Lindsay could continue to go to Family Group while Natalie does not feel able to do so because of the problems with her partner. It was not known when Natalie intended to come back (at the time of the second fieldwork in early May, it had been four weeks since she last attended). The therapist was in the process of making contact with Natalie to determine whether she needed one to one support and work with her to help her to attend the group again.

Despite the setbacks, Lindsay has been making good progress particularly at school, although to a lesser degree at home, to the extent that it was being considered whether she might be able to graduate at the end of the summer term.

Case study 3: Leo and Ana

Leo and Ana: summary

Leo's communications and interpersonal skills were very poor and his violent behaviour towards others led to repeated exclusions. His mother Ana had no support network in the UK and spoke poor English so the family is very isolated.

The family continues to face difficult times. Ana is seriously ill. They have moved to another area so Leo can no longer attend Family Group. Before the move, staff saw Leo begin to express his feelings and to show empathy towards others, but his need for support continues to be very high.

Leo was 8 and in year 4 at primary school when OPM first went to visit him and his mother, Ana. Ana is a single parent and Leo is the younger of two children that live with her. She also has another daughter who does not live with her. Ana is of a southern European background and speaks limited English. Leo and Ana had been attending Family Group since November 2011. In March 2012, the family moved out of the area and Leo transferred to a different school, so he stopped attending Family Group²⁴.

²⁴ Ana could not be interviewed in the second round of fieldwork due to illness; members of school staff and the SFW therapist were interviewed about the family.

Before Family Group

Leo has severe difficulties with communication and interpersonal skills. He does not communicate with people he does not know. Even with people he knows, including Ana, he does not make eye contact or respond with any form of emotion or perspective. He is very withdrawn, does not smile and does not have friends. He did not like going to school and was frequently absent (with an attendance record of around 60%) or late for school.

Ana herself had a very difficult childhood. She was severely physically abused by her mother, who regularly beat her, so that she had to go to hospital for stitches on numerous occasions. At the age of 13, Ana was abandoned by her mother and left to look after her six siblings, including a baby aged one. Ana's partner, William's father, has been an unreliable support. He left the UK when William was two in order to avoid arrest on drug related charges, returning a year later to serve his sentence. On release from prison he lived with the family very briefly before leaving without warning and returning to his native country.

At school, Leo exhibited very violent behaviour. He often brought in small instruments, such as knives and screwdrivers, and attacked other pupils who had upset him. He was repeatedly excluded from the school and was at risk of permanent exclusion.

Leo was referred to Family Group by the school, and Ana decided to attend because she was desperate for Leo's behaviour to improve, and had nowhere else to turn. Leo was not formally known to social services; Ana had no support network at all in the UK and her access to services was minimal due to her limited English.

At Family Group

Ana enjoyed coming to Family Group. The most useful aspect for her was the opportunity to meet other families. Since she speaks limited English and has no family or social support network in the UK, Ana was very isolated which made the issues with Leo even harder for her to deal with. Seeing that other families are also in difficult situations helped her to feel less alone.

She also thought that it was also beneficial for Leo to see that other children also struggle with their behaviour, and that it is an issue that can be worked on:

'He can see that he is not the only one who is bad. He can see how the other children are also trying with their parents.'

In addition to Family Group, Leo often had one to one support in the classroom. Ana thought this combination of support was helpful, because Leo's needs were so considerable.

Outcomes for the family

Leo expressing his feelings

When OPM visited in February, the school-based partner felt that Leo was starting to show signs of progress in terms of expressing his feelings and showing empathy.

'Leo is beginning to show empathy and show sadness, but it is very embryonic.'

However, at this time Leo had just been excluded because the previous day he had brought a screwdriver into school with the intention of hurting someone in his class who had annoyed him. It was very difficult for the school to try and establish why Leo had done this, as he still could not articulate his feelings about it, despite working on this issue in Family Group. One of the goals for Leo that the school-based partner identified in February was that he would

become more expressive and articulate, so that he could explain his own feelings and start to recognise those of others.

In May, and prior to Leo leaving the school, the school-based partner reported that Leo had made some progress in this area. He had begun to recognise that certain things he did and said were wrong, and could hurt people, and that other things were good, and pleasing to others. He had begun to make more eye contact and therefore was communicating slightly better with his mother, and also with other members of the group. The progress was small, but should be considered significant for a child starting from the point at which Leo did in terms of the severity of his communication and interpersonal difficulties and complex and troubling family circumstances.

Improvement at school

In February, Ana had begun to notice a slight change in Leo's attitude to school. She felt frustrated because there was a limited amount that she herself could do to support his progress academically:

'Leo doesn't like school. He is a bit better as he has started reading and doing homework more, but I can't help him, because I can't read.'

The future

Prior to Ana and Leo joining Family Group, the family had been re-housed in order to have more space for Ana and the two children. For some months Ana had been seeking places for both her children in a school closer to the new accommodation. When OPM returned to visit the school in May, Leo and his sibling had moved schools. Because Leo is at a different school, he is no longer able to attend Family Group, and the (original) school was very concerned about his prospects for the future without this support. It was feared that without the right support, Leo is at high risk of very poor outcomes:

'It is such a shame he left at a time when he did, because he won't be getting this help anywhere else. He is one of those children who is already well on track to becoming a prisoner at Feltham young offenders' in a few years, and could very easily end up in the criminal justice system as soon as he hits secondary school.'

The therapist recognised that Ana's need for support remains extremely high and has encouraged her to stay in contact with the Family Group even though Leo has left the school. However, at the time of the second fieldwork in May, she was seriously unwell and undergoing exploratory investigations at hospital. Struggling to look after Leo and his sister, she had asked her mother to come and stay with them in order to help. Family Group staff are extremely concerned about this, because Ana's mother is known to have been a very negative influence in the past; furthermore Ana is experiencing financial difficulties because of having to support her mother (including by paying for 80 cigarettes a day).

Leo's new school does not offer the Family Group intervention. It is not known to what degree Ana will therefore be able to support Leo going forward, during a time when the family's already vulnerable situation is heightened.

Case study 4: Sophie and Sam

Sophie and Sam: summary

Sophie used not to listen to others, either adults or children, and there were constant arguments at home, she was distracted in the classroom, and struggled to make friends. Young mum Sam lacked confidence and parenting skills and suffered low self-esteem.

Now, Sam has gained enormously in terms of confidence, which means she can parent Sophie more effectively. Sophie is more secure and happier; she doesn't play up all the time so her behaviour is much improved and her attainment at school has impressed staff.

Sophie is 5 and is in the reception class at primary school. Sam is 24 and a single mum to Sophie. Sam doesn't have a job but she helps out at the school as a classroom helper. Sophie and Sam have been attending the Family Group since October 2011.

Before Family Group

Being a young mum and without a partner, Sam felt insecure about being a mother before she started going to Family Group:

'I felt, I'm no good at being a mum. I didn't know what I was doing. She plays me up all the time and I don't know how to deal with it.'

The family live with Sam's parents, and Sam felt that this was impacting on her ability to learn to be a parent herself, because they would always 'interfere' and make her feel she was 'no good' at it. They seemed to be in a pattern in which Sam's parents did not see her as a competent mother, and she could not help reacting against their authority. As well as affecting Sam's confidence, the dynamics meant that levels of conflict were high:

'They were always butting in because they think they know best. And there was a lot of yelling and screaming in the house and a lot of tears all round. We were all stressed, me, Sophie, my parents. We were all at boiling point.'

One of the key issues was around getting Sophie to listen and pay attention. This was causing Sophie problems in class and leading to other children not wanting to play with her; she did not make friends, which was very upsetting for her. Sam wanted to address the issue of Sophie listening to her, in the hope that it would have a knock-on effect at school.

Sam's insecurity and lack of confidence combined with Sophie's behaviour meant she really felt in need of outside help, and jumped at the opportunity to try the Family Group.

At Family Group

The targets are an effective motivator for Sophie, because she wants to impress the older children, who she looks up to. The targets are also a useful tool in getting Sophie to behave:

'If she isn't doing what she's told I'll say, if you don't follow my rules I'm going to mark you down to a 3, or a 2 – and it works.'

This applies to the school too - they praise Sophie for good scores and show disappointment for poor ones, and this has a powerful effect on Sophie's efforts to raise her scores:

'Sophie loves Family Group, it really matters to her. And that means that we can use the group as a way of influencing her behaviour positively.' (School-based partner)

The activity session is a chance for Sophie to show that she can work nicely with others; she will make an effort to prove herself. Then, outside of Family Group, Sam can remind Sophie of how well she can behave:

'If I ask her to make eye contact, it clicks with her, "oh I had to do it in Family Group, now I've got to do it at home".'

The SFW therapist credits the activity sessions with showing Sam 'a different way of being'; it is a chance for her to see how other parents interact with children, as well as the opportunity to feel proud of Sophie for working nicely.

Sam also thinks that it is good for Sophie to have an opportunity to interact with dads (on the occasions that a dad attends): *'it's nice for her to see that there are nice dads!'*

Parent time is extremely valuable to Sam. It helps her in a number of ways:

- It is an opportunity to get advice and ideas from other parents, based on how they have seen Sophie behaving, and on their own experiences. Sam described the other parents as a 'fountain of knowledge'. For example, the other mums told Sam to get a second opinion about Sophie's eyesight: *'I never would have thought of doing that before.'*
- The mix of parents provides role models. The more experienced parents, who have been attending the group for longer, act as role models for Sam: being able to see how far others have come reassures Sam that she can make progress too.
- Sam feels accepted and understood by the group. She had previously gone to a mother and toddler group, but found the mothers were 'cliquey' and unfriendly, because Sophie struggled to get on with other children. Family Group parents were more accepting; she felt that they recognised in her what they had been through themselves.

'Family Group was the first time I had felt comfortable talking in front of people- because they knew what I was going through. I think they see me as someone that they can help.'

- The group is a forum that is both challenging and caring. The other parents reassure Sam that Sophie's behaviour is not always her fault, which makes her feel more confident. They are also honest with each other when they don't agree:

'That's what I love about it – they give you the truth! And it's much better than when my parents say it – with them I'll just go, "you don't like me!" You need someone outside the family who's been through the same thing to tell you what you should do.'

This combination of challenge and care makes the group a constructive and powerful experience for Sam:

'In my first session, there was this issue with this parent [...] – they thought they'd scared me away but actually the fact I saw the group dealing with it was really good for me. I could see that they just wanted to help her. It showed me that they care.'

- It is a social opportunity, a way for Sam to get to know other mums. They have arranged social get-togethers, which has helped to reduce Sam's isolation.

Sam values the expertise and knowledge of the SFW therapist who runs the group, finding her guidance of the group to be appropriate and thoughtful:

'She listens but she does guide us too, steers us the right way if we go off the topic.'

The therapist has helped Sam with her own mental health issues, observing that Sam has low-esteem and, in the earlier days of her attendance at Family Group in particular, tended to put herself down. Sam described herself as:

'A bit depressed – I've got this thing where I don't want to leave the house, it scares me.'

This came up while Sam and the therapist were talking one to one; she did not feel comfortable with doing so in front of the group:

'They are my friends and I don't want them to think badly of me... and I don't think they will, it's just... Whereas [she] is a therapist and can help with that side of things.'

Sam felt better having talked to the therapist about her feelings of depression, and by the suggestion that she could go to see her GP to seek help. As well as getting practical advice, having someone to talk to helps her get used to talking about her feelings with others:

'Before there wasn't anyone. Having her there has helped me to open up to my parents about what I was feeling.'

The therapist being external to the school makes a difference to Sam too; she would feel nervous about 'admitting' her feelings to someone at the school.

The school-based partner co-facilitates the group with the SFW therapist. Sam sees him as a useful link between the group and the other teachers, feeding information in both directions:

'He's always there to help and he knows what's going on in the group, he can talk to the teacher about ideas for helping the child and getting them to do their targets... We can also talk to him about if we have a problem with a teacher.'

Outcomes for the child

Listening

Sophie has got better at making eye contact, listening and paying attention, at home and at school. With Sophie listening, she is more likely to do what Sam tells her, such as sit at the table to eat, which reduces stress and arguments:

'She listens more – it's great. She eats her dinner – I don't have to yell and scream at her for an hour. I can explain to her that if she eats she won't be hungry any more. And it works – because she is listening, I can explain things to her.'

Behaviour at school

Sophie used to get a lot of 'time-outs' in class, because she wasn't doing what she was told and wouldn't share. This is no longer the case: she behaves better and has succeeded on her target, 'to share'. She understands that she has to let others have their turn.

Making friends

Sophie used to play on her own a lot; now she moves easily from group to group to play with different people, sometimes taking someone with her as she moves. This came about partly because Sam talked to Sophie's teacher, who helped by pairing the children up. It has also developed through the group, because they practice playing and working together as part of the session. Sophie has become more confident and independent from Sam:

'With something new she would used to cling to me at first before joining in, and she's better now at not doing that so much.'

Attainment at school

Better at listening to the teacher, and less distracted by incidents caused by her problems with sharing, Sophie is doing well academically: she is in the highest reading group in her class. Another factor that has helped her to achieve this is the time she spends reading with Sam's mother. Sam is dyslexic, and she had always felt afraid about not being able to help Sophie with her reading. Because of her improved relationship with her mum, which has come about through Family Group, she can accept her mum's help with Sophie's reading. The improved family dynamics are helping to ensure a more coordinated approach to meeting Sophie's needs, including her academic needs.

Routine at home

Sam used to put Sophie to bed watching TV because 'it was easier', but she would not fall asleep. The other mums at the group suggested taking the TV away, and replacing it with classical music and a night light. There has been a huge improvement:

'I go upstairs an hour after she's been put to bed and she's actually asleep, instead of being awake and arguing with me!'

The morning routine has also improved: Sophie's tantrums about having her hair brushed can make them late for school. They have worked on this with some suggestions from the Family Group parents about setting clear expectations and using pictures to remind Sophie what she has to do to get ready for school.

Happier, with fewer tantrums

Sophie is happier, calmer and smiling more than she used to. One key expression of this is that she has fewer tantrums now, which Sam attributes to a number of changes. Firstly the improvements in the relationship between Sam and her parents means that there are fewer arguments at home, so Sophie is not being distressed by this conflict:

'Sophie's happier because we're not all yelling and screaming all the time; she's not crying all the time; there are fewer tantrums.'

Secondly, because Sam is a more proactive and confident parent, Sophie does not need to act up to get her attention:

'I didn't know how to interact with her; she had no structure. Whatever happened when it happened. And I didn't know what was needed. And I know what I'm doing more now – and Sophie knows I know, and that gives her more confidence in me.'

If Sophie does have a tantrum, Sam can cope and stay calm, so her parents do not have to intervene. After a tantrum, Sophie calms down more quickly than she used to, sometimes using techniques from Family Group such as counting to ten or singing a song, and usually she will say she is sorry to Sam. Their interaction has improved, in terms of both getting along together well, and setting and respecting boundaries more effectively:

'We're getting along a lot better, playing together – and when I don't want to play her games, she can tell now that when I'm saying no, I mean it.'

The SFW therapist suggests that the newly more unified household, with a consistent message from Sam and her parents about who's 'the boss', is making Sophie feel more secure. Before, Sophie would play off the adults in the house against each other in order to get her own way, but as the therapist describes:

'That feeling of power isn't good for children, it's frightening. I think Sophie feels safer and happier knowing the boundaries.'

Outcomes for the parent

Greater confidence

Sam is more confident in herself as a mother; she is better able to resist blaming herself when Sophie is acting up, and to believe that she can deal with it. She feels more able to accept responsibility for being Sophie's mother. She realises that it is not necessarily her fault when Sophie is upset - she tries to find out why, and if it is not her 'fault', *'then I'm not going to get all upset about it like I used to.'*

As well as using the targets to get Sophie to behave, Sam is better able to stay calm and ask Sophie nicely to do something. Sometimes she raises her voice, but there is much less resort to shouting than in the past. When she uses the threat of a punishment with Sophie, she follows it through, so that Sophie understands there are consequences to her behaviour.

Sometimes Sophie will sulk when she is told off by Sam and say, 'you're not my best friend!' This used to make Sam feel guilty and rejected. But now she recognises that she does not have to be Sophie's friend: she has to be her mother, which means being clear about who is the boss and not being 'emotionally blackmailed' into saying sorry or giving in to Sophie.

Sam can enjoy the experience of being a mother, because she is less stressed out by worrying about doing it wrong and because Sophie respects the boundaries she is setting:

'It is so much better now. I actually enjoy being a mum, instead of being upset and angry all the time. Because I felt like I didn't know what I was doing, I was uptight, overprotective. Now we can go to the park and play without me worrying she's going to run off, because I know she'll do what she's told.'

The SFW therapist has noticed Sam's improved confidence in terms of her demeanour at the group: she is much more vocal compared to when she joined the group.

Sam is also about to start looking for a job - a big step for her in terms of confidence. Along with some of the other mums in the group, she plans to take her CV to some local shops. The SFW therapist agrees that this is a very positive step for Sam. Having a job will increase Sam's confidence further and help to keep her busy so she spends less time alone.

Improved relationship with her parents

On the advice of the group, Sam asked her parents to give her the space to deal with Sophie, *'not to come barging in straightaway, they need to let me try.'* And they have done; they are now more likely to back Sam up, instead of undermining her.

'They will still sometimes come and try to get involved, but I can head them off and explain, this is what's happened, this is what I've done – you don't need to do anything.'

Sam knows it is hard for her parents not to get involved, 'because I'm still their baby.' But they all recognise that it's important for Sophie to have clarity on who is in charge of her. At the group, Sophie was asked, 'who's the boss in your house?' And she answered, 'Mummy'. Before, she was confused by the dynamics in the household:

'If she had been asked that in the group, she would have got upset because she didn't know. Now she knows that I'm the boss – or the boss of her anyway. I might not be the boss of the house, but she knows that as far as she's concerned, she does what I say.'

Not only have Sam's parents changed their attitude so that they are more supportive – suggesting ideas rather than telling her what to do - Sam finds that she feels more able to accept their support, instead of 'automatically' reacting against it. For example, Sam's mum had an idea to get Sophie to eat her vegetables; because Sam now allows herself to accept advice, they tried it and it works.

Less isolated

Sam is the only person in her family to have been a teenage mum or on benefits, so she feels isolated in her family. Outside the family too, her former partner *'kind of isolated me from my friends, and I don't have a job so I can't make new friends.'*

So the Family Group has helped a lot in rebuilding social networks for Sam. She is spending less time by herself and has opportunities to talk about her feelings, and this means she knows she is not alone - which is positive for her mental health.

'I can talk more about my feelings, and I know when I do need help with something - rather than it just being in my head. It was because I felt so isolated, and now I know that I'm not. I'm not the only with problems with their kids. It sounds bad but it's nice to know that there are problems with Sophie, because I can't help her with her problems if I don't know that they're there, because I'm just thinking it's problems with me.'

Outcomes for the school

The school is pleased with the improvements in Sophie's behaviour because it means there are fewer incidents to distract the class from learning. Sophie's improved ability to follow directions is also showing benefits in terms of her attainment, as described above.

The future for Sophie and Sam

Sam will continue building on the progress she has made at the group in terms of her own confidence as a parent. They will also continue to negotiate relationships at home, in order for Sam to accept her parents' advice, while they respect her authority over Sophie.

In terms of targets, Sophie is currently working on 'trying for herself', rather than asking someone to help her. This may be related to the home situation where, until the changes brought about by Family Group, all of the adults would do things for Sophie. With the new more coherent approach at home between Sam and her parents, this may improve.

The therapist will continue to remind Sam of how well they are doing and how far she has come; she expects that Sam and Sophie could think about graduating from the group around halfway through the next school year (which will be 18 months since joining the group).

Case study 5: Daisy and Lucy

Daisy and Lucy: summary

Aged 6, Daisy behaved like a 'stropky teenager' at home and at school. Mum Lucy did not know how to deal with it; constant arguments left them both angry and frustrated and the school struggling to support Daisy's educational progress.

Now, Lucy is a calmer and less reactive parent; she recognises the benefits of positive praise and recognition and this is reflected in Daisy's dramatically improved behaviour.

Daisy attended Family Group at her primary school for two years from the age of 5, along with her mother, Lucy. Daisy is the oldest of three siblings. The family graduated from Family Group in March 2012²⁵.

Before Family Group

Lucy is a young mother and found it hard to balance her time between her three children. She was struggling to cope with Daisy's difficult behaviour; she would get angry and shout at Daisy, but things didn't improve and she was frustrated and stressed. The therapist saw Lucy as a 'reactive' parent, which meant that conflict between her and Daisy could easily escalate to the point where they were shouting and crying; it was distressing for Lucy:

'Of course, I used to feel awful for shouting at her, but at the time I felt it was the only thing I could do - I was just so angry with her all the time.'

At school, Daisy was disruptive in class and described as being 'very stropky': she did not listen, would answer back rudely and walk away when she did not want to hear something. A member of school staff described her as 'a teenage six year old'. Her behaviour and attitude made her difficult to handle in the classroom.

Concerned about her behaviour, the school referred Daisy to the group at its inception in the school. Lucy decided to attend because she was also concerned about Daisy's behaviour at school and at home and about her own ability to handle it. She *'felt stuck, and knew that something had to change'*, but she didn't know what, or how.

At Family Group

Lucy and Daisy both like all parts of the Family Group sessions. They enjoy the games and activities that give them a chance to interact with each other, not only learning more positive ways of interacting and avoiding conflict, but simply spending 'quality time' together. As Lucy explained, this was particularly valuable in the context of having three children at home, and it enabled her to recognise that Daisy needs her attention:

'It means that it is not about the other kids, you can give attention to that one child - they crave that attention from their parent.'

The 'hot seat' session in which the families reflect on the children's performance on their targets throughout the week was useful because it motivated Daisy to work hard to achieve her targets, and she is happy and proud of herself when she performs well.

²⁵ Therefore in the second round of fieldwork in May 2012, Lucy was interviewed by telephone as she was no longer attending the school for Family Group

The support of other parents in the group during parent time was extremely beneficial to Lucy. They were able to give each other ideas about how to deal with various problems that they have encountered at different times; with having a mix of ages (4-8) in the group, the parents of older children could often advise those of younger ones. The group developed a real sense of solidarity and closeness which helped Lucy to feel that she was not the only mother who struggled, and that there were people there for her to talk to:

'If you've got a problem you can see what the other parents would do about it... they can see things you can't, so you're not alone and you become quite close. You can all talk to each other.'

Lucy has a close relationship with the therapist, and feels that she can draw on her support whenever necessary; this support was not restricted to Family Group hours, nor only to matters relating to Daisy. The therapist helped Lucy to understand that change in Daisy would not come about without change in herself.

'I text her if I have any problems, I have that relationship with her. Even about my personal life. At the beginning I was so nervous but then you all know why you're here, we want to help our children ourselves. Sometime adults need to admit that they need to change.'

The therapist created a non-judgemental and open forum for parents which gave Lucy an important outlet for her feelings:

'She doesn't judge us, I can be myself with her. I can go crazy, be calm and have those ups and downs because sometimes you need to rant – she gives us that outlet.'

Outcomes for the child

Improved behaviour

The therapist felt it was entirely appropriate for Daisy to graduate in March, because she was consistently getting 4s (the highest mark) on all her targets, which reflected that her behaviour was much improved, and much more settled, rather than being punctuated by sulks and disruptions as it used to be. She is now able to self-regulate her feelings, and reflect on her actions, rather than overreacting and kicking up a fuss.

Ongoing support

The school-based partner says that although Daisy has graduated, it is important to remember that she is not 'cured'. Not going to the group any more is a loss to Daisy, and the school and the therapist recognise that she will continue to need support in order to sustain the changes she has made.

For this reason, the therapist continues to see Daisy once a week for 10 minutes, for a chat – *'just to make her feel that she's still special.'* The school will continue to be supportive, by continuing to set and mark Daisy's target cards and if she is good, she gets to spend time reading with school-based partner, as a reward.

A role model for others

The concept of the 'role model' has had a significant effect on Daisy. As one of the longest-standing members of the group and now a graduate, she knows she is expected to be a role model and she rises to it, as the school-based partner observed:

'You can see her raising her game in order to play that role.'

Daisy has continued to stay involved with the Family Group in an 'advisory role', which means that she comes in to the group from time to time to remind the other children how she dealt with a particular issue which is affecting them too, e.g. 'calming down'. This is good for both the other children and Daisy.

Outcomes for the parent

More confident and positive as a parent

Because of the constant conflict between her and Daisy, Lucy used to feel very negative towards Daisy. Their relationship was characterised by anger and frustration, and she found it difficult to enjoy the experience of motherhood. Now, Lucy's outlook has changed significantly – she thinks, feels and behaves much more positively towards Daisy, recognising that if she praises and appreciates her, Daisy will respond well:

'I've learned to be calm, and positive. I don't focus on the negative all the time – I focus on the positive and getting positive results. I will praise her for good things, and listen to her more, rather than thinking that she has nothing good to say.'

Importantly, Lucy realised that Daisy's reactive and 'stroppy' behaviour was a mirror of her own:

'Daisy was being like me - so I had to change for her to.'

Happier

As a result of Family Group, Lucy has developed a calmer and more reflective parenting style. She no longer shouts as much and has a lot more patience. She feels happier, because she can enjoy being with Daisy instead of worrying about how to deal with her behaviour:

'I'm more happy than I was. Before, I didn't even like to be in her [Daisy's] company, which is horrible to say, but I didn't like her behaviour very much.'

'I know now if I was to go out for a day, I wouldn't be dreading it like I used to. I'm able to focus more on other stuff rather than worrying about her kicking off, I've learnt to deal with it better.'

Lucy feels that she and Daisy have progressed much further than she could have ever expected over the past two years, and says that this is "100%" due to Family Group.

Improved relationship with the school

Lucy feels that her relationship with the school is much improved because of Family Group; instead of being very negative because any contact from the school was associated with Daisy behaving badly, it has become much more collaborative and constructive. Lucy and the school work together to resolve issues, rather than Lucy wanting to avoid them:

'Before I didn't even want to talk to them, they'd come up to me and say Daisy done this, this and this and I wouldn't even speak. But now I can go up to any of them and say, this is the problem, and then we can sort it out.'

The future for Daisy and Lucy

Daisy has improved a lot in school and at home. Because Family Group has been so positive for Daisy, after lots of discussion between the therapist, Daisy and her teacher, they have decided to continue using the target card, which will help to keep Daisy on track.

Lucy felt that it was the right time to graduate because she no longer needs Family Group, although she misses the company and support from the other members and the therapist. She feels that she will be able to use the parenting techniques she has learnt at Family Group with her two younger children. She is also considering training as a teaching assistant.

Plans for the future

Roll-out of Family Groups

The enthusiasm of the heads in the three schools and of the Early Intervention Service for Family Groups has led to a strong appetite in the borough to roll out Family Groups to more schools. About six schools have collaborated with SFW on bids to secure funding for groups.

SFW has set up a clinical practice group to consider the introduction of the [Adverse Childhood Experience](#) questionnaire to be completed by parents in Family Groups. It assesses traumatic childhood experiences, which have been shown to have strong associations with health and social problems in later life. SFW expect that this applies to many of the parents in Family Groups, and hope that the use of the questionnaire may help to show that families perceived as 'troubling' are in fact needy.

Graduate group

SFW is in the process of developing a 'graduate group' for families who have completed their time at Family Group. The concept is that one parent will be trained, supervised and paid by SFW to 'host' the group, which will be attended by other parents. The aim is to continue to provide mutual support to families who have graduated in order to help them sustain the positive impacts of the intervention and support them to continue to practice and model positive ways of thinking, behaving and interacting.

5.5 Factors which have facilitated and hindered success

Facilitators of success

Persistence in engaging parents

There has been no challenge to recruitment in the sense that there is no shortage of families identified by schools as being in need of a place in Family Group. However, there are parents who are reluctant to get involved when they are initially approached. SFW's approach to engaging these parents is to try and maintain contact with those who have turned down the invitation to join ('refusers') or whose attendance is one-off or inconsistent ('triers'). This persistence has led to a number of families joining and staying in the group, following initial reluctance:

'Lots of these parents haven't had someone care about them before. They're suspicious of it. They need time to get used to the idea that we are going to care about them.' (SFW project manager)

Persistence with children is important too: schools need to convince the children that they are not going to give up on them.

Setting clear expectations of parents

Setting clear expectations of parents by being transparent from the outset about the ethos and principles of Family Group helps to ensure they embark on it with the right mindset. The school and SFW make it clear to parents that Family Group is about parent *and* child: it is not about 'fixing a problem with the child'. Parents need to acknowledge their own role and influence on their child, and accept that they are key to the change process. This is part of moving away from a 'deficit' model towards getting parents to see that they have strengths, resilience and skills that can be tapped into in order to make a difference to their family.

Availability of therapist

Many of the parents with whom Family Group seeks to work are distrustful of professionals, based on previous experiences. For this reason, SFW therapists try to avoid an 'us-and-them' type hierarchy or unequal power dynamic, by being genuinely available to the parents.

'It's 'our' group – it's never 'my' group.' (SFW therapist)

This means being accessible and approachable, even outside the group (for example, parents can phone or text the therapists during the week). This helps parents to trust the therapist, and allow themselves to be emotionally 'contained' by them; which helps the parent to emotionally contain their own child.

Mutual/peer support and trust

As well as trust between parents and the therapist, trust between the parents in each group is key to its success. They feel accepted, rather than judged. Because of the trust between parents, they will dip into their own (often painful and difficult) experiences to empathise and offer help and advice to each other, creating a strong community of mutual support with a large pool of experience to share. Trust is also crucial because of the highly sensitive and personal nature of the discussions that take place at Family Group sessions; members need to feel sure that each other will maintain confidentiality outside the group, otherwise they would not be able to speak openly about their issues.

One headteacher observed:

'I think they get an enormous strength from having shared problems and shared problem solving. Realising that their problems are not unique, that there are solutions to them, and that they can talk them through together.'

Design of Family Group sessions

The way Family Group sessions are structured is key to their effectiveness: each part of the session – target setting, activity, parent time – plays an important part. In addition to the formal structure of sessions, informal practice is also key, such as making tea and coffee at the beginning and staying to chat afterwards. One group has a list of members' birthdays, and of how they take their tea or coffee; this makes parents feel valued and helps to create a caring, personal atmosphere and a sense of belonging. Evidence that this is working well is that some parents are spending their own time and money to make cakes to bring to the group, and getting there early to help set up the chairs.

'To me this says that people are giving back to the group, they are taking responsibility for nurturing the group themselves... instead of it just being about them getting something from it.' (SFW therapist)

Strong relationship with schools

The commitment of the host school is essential to the success of Family Group, because it requires the support of the school to take children out of their lessons for Family Group itself, commit the time of the school-based partner, and of teachers to complete the target cards and feed in information about the children. The role of the school-based partner is key, as explained by one of the school heads:

'The fact that the school puts resources into the group in the form of [the school-based partner], it sends a positive message to the group because she is there as a school person but in a non-confrontational, understanding role. It helps to break down the 'us and them' feeling that some parents have towards school. She is a conduit which helps communication, information both ways, but also having her engage parents as school person is important for sustainability, because she can continue the relationship with parents beyond Family Group.'

As well as this practical support then, it is important that schools buy in to the approach of Family Group, by reflecting the ethos in their own dealings with the child and parent: build trust and show genuine care and commitment to helping the family.

Many parents have had a bad experience of school during their own childhood, which informs their attitude to schools in general. These parents are often mistrustful of their child's school and see school as not being 'on their side'. In this way, basing Family Group in school is important, because it helps parents to get used to coming into school and become comfortable with it.

Stability of leadership is key because Family Group is a long term intervention, with exit being carefully planned to ensure that families only leave the group when they are ready.

Close fit with other support

SFW works closely with schools to ensure that Family Group fits into the school's overall approach to pastoral support. They do this by communicating regularly with the pastoral support team to exchange information about individual families and discuss what other support they may need, for example, being signposted to sexual health services or encouraged to take up a positive activity such as the Duke of Edinburgh's Award.

SFW also maintains close contact with other agencies including Educational Psychology, Behaviour Support and the Early Intervention Service. Being linked in with the wider infrastructure helps ensure that Family Group fits well with provision by other services.

In keeping with its ethos of addressing the needs of the whole family in order to support the child, SFW is currently working with other agencies to look at setting up a programme to support parents experiencing ongoing domestic violence. This is in response to a need identified through conversations at Family Group, where it emerged that a number of families have been affected by domestic abuse (around half of families in one of the three groups).

Parents on steering group

Parents from the Family Groups attend the steering group for the Family Group project in Feltham and Hanworth, and give reports on their experiences of Family Group to the various

professionals. This is proving powerful in several ways. It demonstrates the importance and value of parents in effecting change for their children. It models to other services that involving service users in a steering group or similar forum is a strong way to check whether services are staying relevant and positive to those they target. It is also empowering for parents, helping to build their skills and confidence. Informal feedback from professional members of the steering group to the SFW project manager shows that they value the insight of parents and feel that they contribute significantly to the group.

Barriers to success

Type of school

The nature of a secondary school as compared to a primary school – its size and the fact that students have multiple teachers rather than one who knows them well – has meant that it is more challenging to spread awareness of the approach amongst the wider staff. It has also impacted on the effectiveness of the weekly target card system (children have found it difficult to remember or get a chance to ask the teacher for each lesson to sign their target card). The SFW therapist for the secondary school communicates with teachers by email in relation to individual children in order to keep them informed and involved; and the school-based partner plays a useful role by sharing the underpinning theory of Family Group with the senior leadership team in the school; however, it is recognised that new ways of communicating with staff in larger schools may be helpful.

Links to adult mental health services

It is the view of SFW that some parents involved in Family Groups have undiagnosed mental health needs that affect their capacity to support their child. SFW currently does not have strong links to adult mental health services and has concerns about these parents once they graduate from Family Group, as the planned 'graduate group' may not be equipped to support them appropriately. SFW is currently considering how Family Group practice and process can best support parents who have this level of need.

5.6 Recommendations

In this chapter the many strengths of the Family Group intervention in supporting some of the most complex and vulnerable families have been described. Its strengths-based approach and the design of sessions have proved effective and popular with both children and parents. The schools involved strongly endorse the Family Group approach and recognise that it provides support which schools cannot, and that the work of Family Group has positive effects for the school. Therefore there are no recommendations for any substantive change to the intervention. However there are three areas in which we offer some suggestions.

The following recommendations relate to the practicalities of running the groups to ensure that they run smoothly and effectively:

- Develop mechanisms to ensure that all staff in school are aware of Family Group and understand its underlying principles and ethos. This will help to ensure consistency between schools and Family Group in their interactions with families, and to increase the impact of Family Group by spreading the message to staff that children's – and parents' – behaviour has a cause and should be responded to accordingly.
- In a secondary school setting, it may be necessary to review the system of target cards, as it has proved difficult in practice for teachers to sign the child's card in each lesson.

- Ensure timing of sessions enables fidelity to the design: it is important to recognise that all parts of the session are valuable and work together, so if practical considerations require sessions to be shorter, very careful management of this is advised (one of the Family Groups is currently trialling a change from morning to afternoon sessions, which means that there is less time overall: this has been cut from the parent reflection time but the therapist is concerned about it).

The following recommendations relate to supporting families beyond their graduation from the group to ensure that the gains are sustained, through a clear plan for what happens during and after the exit process:

- Develop pathways and mechanisms for supporting children after graduation from the group. While currently the SFW therapists and school staff continue to support children informally following their graduation, it may be worth formalising the continuation of support so that the child does not feel 'abandoned'. As many families have 'chaotic' lifestyles, it may work best if it is: tailored to needs of individuals; involves schools as well as SFW; and focuses on the child moving towards independence (rather than remaining dependent on this support).
- Develop an approach to supporting parents with undiagnosed mental health needs, both during and after their time in Family Group.

The following recommendations relate to data collection during the next year of the intervention in order to contribute to a fuller understanding of its impact:

- Attendance data should show the proportion of absences that are authorised and unauthorised.