Effective casework practice with adolescents: perspectives of statutory child protection practitioners

Virginia Schmied* and Peter Walsh†
*Associate Professor, School of Nursing and Midwifery, College of Health and Science, University of Western Sydney, Penrith and †Director, Centre for Parenting and Research, New South Wales Department of Community Services, Sydney, Australia

ABSTRACT

Many child protection practitioners struggle with the complexity of problems and the limited casework time for adolescent cases. However, there is little research on child protection practice or case management that can guide a practitioner working with adolescents in the child protection system. The aim of this study was to explore and describe the nature of effective child protection practice with adolescents from the perspective of statutory child protection practitioners in one state in Australia. Data were collected through focus group discussions and interviews with child protection practitioners and managers currently working with adolescents (n = 44). A grounded theory approach was used to identify the dominant themes or categories and form linkages and relationships through constant comparison techniques. Seven key categories emerged from this analysis: characteristics of the young person and their family; ‘walking it together’ – the centrality of relationships; ‘looking back/looking forward’ – practice strategies; practitioner attributes and skills; ‘walking a fine line’ – working with the families of adolescents; ‘walking with services’ – effective inter-agency work; and organizational context in effective child protection practice with adolescents. Key implications for practice and areas for further research were discussed.

INTRODUCTION

Adolescence is a period of intense and rapid development characterized by numerous challenges as adult identities are forged (Lerner & Villarruel 1994; Steinberg & Morris 2001; Cameron & Karabanow 2003). For some young people, this period is particularly difficult because there are family and community risk factors, such as parental mental illness, substance abuse, domestic violence and child abuse or neglect, that tend to lead to poorer developmental outcomes (Miller & Glinski 2000; Smith et al. 2005).

Many child protection practitioners struggle with the complexity of working with adolescents in the context of limited casework time and the imperative to focus on the most immediate or presenting problem. (Miser 1996). The nature of adolescence itself, often characterized by a degree of risk taking, together with the more challenging needs of young people who are distressed or traumatized, present difficulties for practitioners who do not have appropriate skills and knowledge. Knowing when to intervene in decision-making and exercise control vs. when to allow the young person to make their own decisions and experience the consequences creates challenges. Young people can give mixed messages about wishes for their own autonomy vs. wanting limits set for them (Ungar 2004).

There is little research on child protection practice or case management that can guide a practitioner who works with adolescents in the child protection system. The limited literature and practice guides available...
typically report or rely on clinical opinion rather than research or evaluation studies. This gap in research is evident both nationally and internationally. What have been studied more commonly are service models and interventions such as multi-systemic therapy and cognitive behavioural therapy for young people with behavioural and emotional difficulties (Kazdin 2005; Rowland et al. 2005; Ishikawa et al. 2007).

The aim of this study is to explore and describe the nature of effective child protection practice with adolescents from the perspective of statutory child protection practitioners in one state in Australia.

**METHOD**

This was an exploratory, qualitative study. Data were collected through focus group discussions and telephone interviews with child protection practitioners and managers currently working with adolescents or who were considered to have skills and knowledge in working with adolescents and their families. The approval to conduct this study was provided by the Executive of the New South Wales (NSW) Department of Community Services in accordance with the National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research issued by the Australian National Health and Medical Research Council.1

**Study setting**

This study was undertaken with child protection practitioners employed in a statutory child protection service in one state in Australia. This department has a statutory responsibility to respond to reports of child abuse and neglect, and requests for assistance in NSW for children and young people aged up to 18 years. Adolescents are a significant part of the client base in this state with the number of 13- and 14-year-olds referred for further assessment being the second most significant age group after infants aged less than 1 year. At the time this study was conducted (2006), there were three specialist adolescent teams operating in identified areas of need.

**Study participants**

A total of 44 practitioners participated in this study. There were 25 female and 19 male participants. Half of the participants (n = 22) were child protection practitioners. Eighteen were employed in specialist adolescent practice and four were managers. The participants came from both metropolitan and rural settings. They had considerable experience working with adolescents both within statutory and non-government organizations. On average, they had worked with adolescents for 10 years (range of 6 months–27 years). There was diversity in the participants’ qualifications and training, ranging from degrees in social work, social welfare, psychology and social sciences to diplomas, certificates and short courses in youth work, solution-focused therapy and counselling.

**Data collection**

Data were collected through focus group discussions and supplemented with telephone interviews for participants who could not attend. Five focus group discussions were held with 37 participants; two practitioners from a rural area took part in a joint telephone interview. Three of the focus groups involved child protection practitioners working in specialist adolescent practice and two were with generalized child protection practitioners. A further five participants were interviewed individually by phone. Focus group discussions ran for approximately 60–90 minutes. A series of questions and key prompts were used to help the discussion (see Table 1).

This study did not identify the individual characteristics of adolescents and their families that may influence casework practice with adolescents, for example, differences based on gender, age in terms of a younger or older adolescent, cultural background or community characteristics.

**Data analysis**

The audio-recorded focus group discussions and telephone interviews were transcribed verbatim. A

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Table 1 Focus groups and interviews – key questions</th>
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<tr>
<td>1 What do you do in your role with adolescents?</td>
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<td>2 Describe the characteristics of the adolescents and their families who you see in your work in child protection?</td>
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<td>3 How would you describe the nature of ‘risk’ in relation to adolescents?</td>
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<td>4 What theories and models do you use when working with these families?</td>
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<td>5 What is it you find works well in working with adolescents and their families?</td>
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<td>6 How do you manage a case plan that involves a number of agencies?</td>
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<td>7 What are the most common frustrations you experience in your work with adolescents and their families?</td>
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<td>8 What do you like most about working with this group?</td>
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grounded theory approach was used to identify the dominant themes or categories and form linkages and relationships through constant comparison techniques (Glaser & Strauss 1967; Strauss & Corbin 1998; Dey 1999). This was an iterative process that included multiple readings of the data and coding of categories and subcategories, identifying characteristics and relationships, and comparing these with other categories until the central category emerges. Each category that emerged through the data analysis is presented in detail in this paper.

The participant’s quotes were linked to the focus group that they took part in and were identified in the following way: SAP – specialist adolescent practitioners and GC – general child protection practitioners.

RESULTS

Seven categories emerged from this analysis:
- Characteristics of the young person and their family
- ‘Walking it together’: the centrality of relationships
- ‘Looking back – looking forward’: practice strategies
- Practitioner attributes and skills
- ‘Walking a fine line’: working with the families of adolescents
- ‘Walking with services’: effective inter-agency work
- Organizational context in effective child protection practice with adolescents.

The relationship between the seven categories is shown in Fig. 1. Each category contributes towards understanding the key elements of effective casework practice with adolescents. They also illuminated the importance of building an effective relationship with adolescents.

Characteristics of the young person and their family

Casework practice with adolescents and their families was considered by participants to be diverse and complex. The nature of casework practice, its intensity and duration, the role of the caseworker, the approaches and strategies that are used and what informed these, as well as the outcomes for young people, are influenced by numerous factors. These include the nature of adolescence itself, and the characteristics and level of need of the adolescents and their family.

The participants in this study emphasized that working with adolescents is different; in particular, their needs are very different from young children and the risk of harm is often difficult to determine. Drawing on developmental theories, they stressed that the nature of adolescence is to take risks as they learn for themselves. As a result, they found it difficult to maintain adolescents in a service: ‘adolescents are also well known “to vote with their feet” ’ (SAP). This sense of lack of control or influence over a young person’s decisions means that child protection practitioners rely on the young person accepting and participating in the services, and this is not easily achieved.

The participants described the cases that they work with and the nature of risk as being on a continuum of risk from ‘not serious enough to remove’ to being ‘at the extreme end’. Participants characterized the children they worked with in this age group as often having a profound sense of loss and little trust in relationships:

They have lost so much these children, [they may have] lost their family who they often still love and that rejection is profound. (SAP)
‘Walking it together’ – the centrality of relationships

A process of relationship building and collaboration or ‘walking it together’ emerged as the central category in this analysis. It incorporates components of other categories such as practice strategies (‘looking back – looking forward’) and practitioner attributes and skills.

The child protection practitioners showed a strong commitment to working with adolescents in a collaborative way. They described this in the following terms:

... I am here and we can walk it together and we’ll give it a shot. (SAP)

In this process, the caseworker is the ‘common denominator’, building and maintaining a relationship with a young person and, as appropriate, their family and helping them engage in services:

... even if they [the young person] are far away [in terms of a placement] you are still that common denominator so you can tell them what is happening to their brothers and sisters, you can tell them what is happening to mum and dad or any of those things. (GC)

Participants indicated that the process of building relationships with young people is supported by a number of important theoretical and conceptual frameworks, for example, strengths-based approaches, systems theory, developmental theories and a socio-ecological model. These frameworks inform practice strategies.

The central feature or component of practice with adolescents (as it is with families) is the need to establish and maintain relationships. It is through this relationship that the caseworker aims to help engage the adolescent and their family in appropriate services:

It is about building that relationship. If you don’t have that relationship you’re not going to be able to balance anything. Once you have got that relationship he/she is going to allow you to speak more openly and to have more of a say in what’s going on. And they will accept your judgement more. And if you can’t form that relationship they are going to spend their time telling you where to go and they will not engage with the services. (GC)

There are three key characteristics or elements of the relationship between child protection practitioners and adolescents: commitment to the young person, connection with and an interest in the young person, and continuity of caseworker.

Commitment

The participants described making a commitment to the young people that they worked with. Commitment is about ‘being there’ for the young person. Child protection practitioners recognized the importance of ‘being there’ and spending time with adolescents, if they are to be successful in developing a relationship and to engage the young person. Committing to adolescents in this way conveys respect and builds trust, sending the message to the adolescent that they are worthwhile people. Child protection practitioners also described their commitment as ‘hanging in there’ and ‘sticking with them’.

Connection

The child protection practitioners also emphasized the connection that they try to form with young people. Connection is about ‘picking up on where they are at’ and knowing their interests. Connection often means doing the little things; ‘like making sure they have their summer clothes’ (GC), making contact with the young person by phone – ‘it only takes a phone call to make their day’ (GC) – and ‘remembering the small things about them, like “how did skating go?” or maybe they have a pet they like to talk about’ (GC).

Continuity

Participants also stressed that the continuity of a caseworker is important in establishing and maintaining relationships. One participant identified that this characteristic of the relationship has the potential for child protection practitioners to be seen as extended family or even as ‘de-facto parents’. (SAP)

Establishing boundaries: a balancing act

Child protection practitioners emphasized the need to establish boundaries and be clear about their role to successfully work with a young person. However, establishing boundaries is seen as a balancing act as child protection practitioners were also mindful of not being too authoritarian.

Further, child protection practitioners discussed the need to limit the access that a young person may have to them. For example, one caseworker clearly told adolescent clients ‘you can’t come and see me twelve times a day’ (GC). However, this raised a contradiction in practice as this same caseworker spoke of ‘being there unconditionally’ for the young person (GC).

‘Looking back – looking forward’: caseworker practice strategies

The practice strategies that child protection practitioners use in working with adolescents and their families...
are described in this category as a process of ‘Looking back – looking forward’. This process has two key components. First, child protection practitioners believe it is crucial to get to know the young person, to understand where they have come from. Second, they are conscious of working with young people by identifying strengths, working towards solutions, setting achievable goals and engaging young people in meaningful activities.

**Looking back**

Drawing on a strengths-based approach to working with young people, child protection practitioners talked of the importance of ‘seeing the person behind the behaviour’ (GC). In order to ‘get to know the adolescent as a person’, they described ‘looking back’ as important ‘... to understand where [this person] has come from’ (SAP). Participants suggested a number of ways to ‘look back’ such as reviewing their file and gathering background information from parents, the young person and previous child protection practitioners. A file review can help build a picture and recognize the needs of the young person, for example, issues around grief and loss or separation from siblings.

The child protection practitioners cautioned that in their efforts to ‘look back’, they may inadvertently use the young person’s past history to make excuses for their behaviour. This has the potential to limit the opportunities for the young person to learn to take responsibility:

> We can go too far to some extent. When the young person arrives, they have had this terrible life and we can make all these kinds of excuses for them about their behaviour. But at the end of the day society has expectations and their behaviour is going to have to conform somewhat. (SAP)

**Looking forward**

The participants talked at length about the importance they placed on ‘looking forward’ together with the young person and their family and, rather than overly focusing on what has happened in the past, to also focus on the future. They used a number of strategies to assist the adolescent to ‘look forward’. Solution-focused therapy was considered to be a tool or strategy that child protection practitioners can use to facilitate young people talking about things that actually work. For example, one caseworker described how they used ‘scaling’ in discussions with young people:

> ... I ask ‘how are you in terms of getting along with your mum – on a scale of one to ten?’ and ‘how would you get to six or seven?’, ‘was there ever a time in the past that you were on a higher number?’ and then you ask them what was happening then and how could it be like that again? (SAP)

The child protection practitioners stressed the importance of getting the young person’s views to encourage their participation and active say in decision-making. This conveys respect and tells the young person that they are important. For example, some talked about first asking the young person to write down the issues and problems from their perspective and to identify what needs to be solved. They suggested that ‘brainstorming ideas’ or writing a list were both good strategies to assist with planning. They also said that reverse role play could be a useful strategy. For example, they may ask the young person to suggest what they think would work best for them and their family.

Setting action-oriented and practical goals is also a key component of effective practice with adolescents. This means identifying small, practical next steps that can be taken and are achievable. However, child protection practitioners were also mindful of what is realistic for these young people to achieve, and a long-term view is usually necessary. For example, effectively managing mental health problems will require long-term effort.

**Caseworker attributes and skills**

Although practice strategies are important, the participants also believed that a practitioner’s approach and style can help or hinder relationships and engagements with a young person. Participants believed that child protection practitioners need to possess personal characteristics or attributes such as empathy, honesty, humility, and being caring, authentic, flexible and practical as well as creative. For example:

> ... being yourself, not being anyone you are not – they pick it up, they will not engage with you if they think you are a fake. (SAP)

Participants were also mindful of their appearance, ‘nobody power dresses and no make-up’ (SAP), and practitioners need to be able to recognize their limits, admit uncertainty or apologize if they have misinterpreted a situation or perhaps done the wrong thing.

> It actually is a very powerful thing. Apologize if you do get it wrong, [for example], ‘that didn’t work and I am sorry I did not trust what you were saying.’ (SAP)
Practitioners also require the skills of a professional helper such as being a good listener, being non-judgemental, being able to be straight and being accountable to a young person. Through this personal style and skill, a caseworker will convey respect and gain the trust of a young person. Accountability is also very important. This means child protection practitioners following through with agreements they have made with adolescents. Participants suggested that sometimes, busy child protection practitioners who are not skilled in working with adolescents may try to avoid them, for example, by not returning calls. If workers do not live up to what they say they will do, then the adolescent will not engage in the service.

Walking a fine line: working with the families of adolescents

The participants talked about when and how they work with the parents and families of adolescents. No matter where they worked on the continuum, from early intervention to out-of-home care, they recognized the central role that families have in the lives of young people. Some child protection practitioners, however, were uncertain or unclear about whether to focus on the adolescent or the parent/s. They described how they ‘walk a fine line’ (GC) attempting to work with both what the adolescent and the parents wanted.

They described the need to recognize that young people, despite a breakdown in family relationships, will also demand respect for their family and can be very protective about their family relationships. This can place the practitioner in a compromising position needing to acknowledge the relationship that exists between the young person and their family, while not condoning the parents’ inappropriate or abusive actions towards a child or young person.

Participants described working with families little by little, ‘just take the small steps’ (GC). They used journals as an opportunity for the young person to write down and reflect on their thoughts and feelings. One child protection practitioner said they suggest to young people to write down what they would like to say to their mother or father and how this can be a good prompt to start them thinking about what they are angry about. Even with the non-engaged parent, one caseworker described facilitating contact with the family, ringing the mother every 3 months over the years to let her know how her son was going. This also provided an opportunity to let the young person know how his mother was going.

‘Walking with services’: effective inter-agency work

Effective inter-agency work is crucial in assisting positive outcomes for young people and their families. Inter-agency work has many parallels or common features with doing effective casework practice with a young person and their family. Inter-agency work, or as it was described in the focus groups, ‘walking with services’, involves building relationships, sharing information and giving feedback, collaborative working and having clear expectations. This takes time and involves being non-judgemental, hanging in there for the long term and being respectful and polite, but this investment will lead to positive outcomes:

When you have a good relationship with the agencies and key people you can get a lot out of them. They will be more flexible, they will hang on to a particularly difficult kid when they have seen that they are working with you. (SAP)

A good collaborative working relationship or partnership can avoid placement breakdown and dissatisfaction between the child protection department, other government and non-government agencies, and the young person and their family. Child protection practitioners talked about working alongside external agencies as equal partners: ‘saying this bit is my job, this is your job, it doesn’t work like that’ (GC). Most importantly, this relationship is about achieving positive outcomes for the young person and their family, and the participants felt that a collaboration is not an end in itself but a means to achieving these outcomes.

The participants described what they did to build these relationships, for example, inviting services to become involved early, sharing information, providing feedback and follow-up, and staying connected. Sharing information needs to be reciprocal. Participants were clear that they needed to constantly keep service providers informed about what they were doing for a young person and their family, ‘what our role is, what we can and can’t do’ (GC). They stressed that if they have the responsibility for case management, then it is up to them to keep the other agencies informed through, for example, sending out notes from the inter-agency meetings or inviting key agencies to initial assessment meetings. They talked about being in constant contact with service providers, being conscious about addressing problems quickly and that ‘regular meetings are the key’ (GC). The participants also stressed the importance of having local knowledge and that they need ‘to be known’ (GC).

Child protection practitioners also said that they have a role in supporting services to help a young
person meet his or her goals. If the aspects of a case plan are not working or the departmental practitioners are concerned that they are not getting the required service for a client, they believe it is important to address this directly with the service:

**The organizational context in effective casework practice with adolescents**

The study identified a number of factors that help or hinder effective casework practice with adolescents. These factors include the organizational context, and caseworker skills and experience in working with adolescents and the demands of providing a child protection service with increasing demand yet finite resources.

**Working in specialist adolescent teams**

Having the opportunity to work in teams or services that focused on adolescents had a number of advantages, including development of expertise and feeling supported in the work environment. For example:

... everyone knows a lot about adolescent issues and we are doing the same work and there is always someone to talk it over with. We are trying to achieve the same things. (SAP)

These child protection practitioners believed that working in teams that focus on adolescents provides the opportunity to work with a young person for a week or a year depending on what the issues are. They also believed that there was an opportunity to intervene early to prevent further problems. They identified the need for managers to have an understanding of an adolescent’s needs and to recognize the time it often takes to develop achievable casework goals with young people or deal with issues such as placement breakdown.

In generalist child protection teams, some participants noted that managers did not have the time to be involved in case planning. For some, competing priorities meant they were not able to give priority to adolescents.

**Building skills and experience in working with adolescents**

Working with adolescents is challenging, demanding, and requires certain skills, training and experience. Practitioners require personal skills and attributes to develop effective relationships and a sound knowledge base of adolescent development, and effective strategies and interventions.

Study participants believed that child protection practitioners often feel anxious about working with adolescents, and most have limited skills in this area. The participants noted that new and inexperienced child protection practitioners could feel intimidated by adolescents. ‘The kid will start swearing and they just want to tell them, “don’t you speak to me like that” ‘ (GC).

**Working with increasing demand and finite resources**

The analysis shows that the central element of effective casework practice with adolescents is a process of engaging with them and building a relationship (‘walking it together’). The child protection practitioners were clear that this required ‘spending time’ and ‘being there’ for the young person. Yet, for those participants who were generalist child protection practitioners, this created real tensions in time management with limited opportunity to follow a case through and to form the type of relationship that is needed.

Child protection practitioners also identified the almost chronic lack of services for young people in need as a factor in determining outcomes. There is a waiting list for many services, such as mental health services. Participants talked about spending hours and days on the phone trying to secure an out-of-home care placement for a young person. This raises the issue of not just lack of services for this group but also lack of effective systems, such as vacancy management systems.

**DISCUSSION**

Child protection practitioners described their key role with adolescents as having to establish and maintain a relationship, and to collaborate or work in partnership with the young person and, as appropriate, their family to help them engage in services. Hammond (2005) and others (Jones 1987; Hill 1999) confirmed this central focus on the relationship, suggesting that establishing meaningful relationships with child protection practitioners and other practitioners is one of the key factors that predict change in adolescents.

The study participants emphasized that specialized skills are needed to work with adolescents in child protection. Working in partnership with adolescents depends on clear communication during all stages of service provision. This includes defining roles, defining the young person’s strengths as well as problems, developing a case plan and discussing referral options. Young people need to know ‘where everyone fits in’
Tensions in working with adolescents in a child protection context

From the study findings, there appears to be three key tensions in this area of child protection practice. First, there is an issue of unconditional commitment vs. establishing boundaries. Both the study findings and the literature indicate that there is a degree of ambiguity about the type of relationship that should be established between a young person and a child protection practitioner. On the one hand, the participants highlighted the pivotal role that they believed they may play in the life of an adolescent. They described the importance of showing a commitment to the young person to work together with them to achieve their goals, and one participant talked of ‘being there unconditionally’ for them. Yet at the same time, the practitioners emphasized the importance of having clear boundaries, for example, relating to availability and the role they have in their lives, and they stressed ‘we are not their buddies’.

Recently, some authors have questioned the setting up of rigid professional boundaries within the helping relationship (e.g. Ribner & Knei-Paz 2002; Leigh & Miller 2004; Maidment 2006). These authors challenged the traditional interpretations of what is considered appropriate in client–worker relationships, such as little or no self-disclosure and not accepting gifts or other tokens of appreciation. These practices contrast, for example, with the views of those from aboriginal indigenous populations and some culturally and linguistically diverse communities, where self-disclosure and ‘storytelling’ is a necessary building block in the helping relationship (Maidment 2006).

Second, there is a tension between supporting and assisting young people as they navigate their way vs. recognizing and encouraging their own agency in decision-making and in identity formation. While a range of theoretical frameworks are available to assist understandings about youth agency, identity and culture, concepts from developmental psychology appear to dominate the practice within child welfare and protection. Sharland (2006) argued that although there is value in understanding adolescence as a time of rapid development where risk taking, albeit within boundaries, is considered usual behaviour, there are other approaches that provide opportunities to engage with young people in a way that facilitates their agency in identity formation.

Third, there are dilemmas about how to respond to risk and ‘risk-taking’ in a child protection context in contrast to how risk and risk taking is constructed for young people in the general community. While some authors recognize the social construction of risk and ‘riskiness’, the practitioners in the child protection context are mindful of their statutory responsibilities laid out in legislation and departmental policies and procedures. As Trotter (2004) argued, the child protection practitioner must be clear about their dual role in providing support but at the same time holding legislative responsibility to protect children and young people. The notion of risk for young people in the general community is often the subject of debate, but in the child protection context this can be particularly fraught.

Practice implications

Working with adolescents in the child protection context

The categories that emerged from the data analysis are similar to the elements of child protection practice with families described by Trotter (2004) and to the components of the parent–helper partnership model explained by Davis et al. (2002). Trotter (2004) found a number of direct-practice skills related to positive outcomes in child protection including:

- Helping clients understand the (dual) role of the child protection worker
- Using a collaborative problem solving approach focusing on the client’s definition of problems (rather than the worker’s definition)
- Reinforcing the client’s pro-social expression and actions
- Making appropriate use of confrontation
- Using relationship skills (empathy, appropriate self-disclosure, humour, optimism).

Drawing on a strengths-based approach to practice, the participants in this study proposed a number of...
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strategies, for example, writing a list of concerns and brainstorming solutions, writing letters or keeping a journal, and participating in role plays to facilitate an opportunity for young people to engage in meaningful activities or dialogue (Hammond 2005).

One of the key messages to come from this research and the work of others (e.g. Jones 1987; Hill 1999; Hammond 2005) is that adolescents need to be engaged in meaningful activities, in that ‘they need to be doing things, not just feeling better about it’. As Jones (1987) and Trotter (2004) both stress, the casework relationship is a means and not an end in itself.

Facilitating connection with family, peers and community

It is important to keep in perspective the relationship that a practitioner has with an adolescent, ‘we are not their family’. In practice, case plans will include strategies to facilitate connection with family. The recent work of Ungar (2004) showed that adolescents continue to rely on their family, and even those who have entered the child protection system have a strong preference to maintain connections with family members. Child protection practitioners who work with adolescents are familiar with this, as they are frequently faced with young people who leave placements to self-place with their family or community. Ungar (2004) found that high-risk young people prefer to expose themselves to the risks their families pose unless alternative placements can provide adequate care and cultivate well-being.

This challenges child protection practitioners to find ways of enabling at-risk young people to have a forum with their primary caregivers, in which they can protect themselves from risk and build a healthy identity. Additionally, there may be value in providing skill development and social integration programmes, such as mentoring programmes, that address the needs of children and young people who are in the child protection system (Cameron & Karabanow 2003).

Working in partnership with agencies and services

The benefits of a collaboration are widely cited in the literature (Altshuler 2003; Cameron & Karabanow 2003; Dufour & Chamberland 2004; Worrall-Davies et al. 2004). It is somewhat surprising that while the participants prioritized the need to work effectively in collaboration with other agencies and services, they were not particularly critical of current interprofessional practice. This is in contrast to much of the literature on inter-agency working that emphasizes the numerous difficulties that services and agencies face in working together (Leutz 1999; Gardner 2006). The participants reported positively on the inter-agency relationships they engage with. Similarly, in the work of Worrall-Davies et al. (2004), participants appeared generally optimistic about inter-agency working and Abbott et al. (2005) reported satisfaction and personal development from inter-agency working.

From their perspective, however, the participants believed that considerable energy is put into building these relationships and ensuring that the partners providing services for adolescents that were case-managed by participants had all the information and resources required. The participants believed that at times, this was ‘a one way street’.

A partnership and collaboration could be described as parallel processes between the caseworker, the young person/client and inter-agency partners. While this relationship needs further study, it is likely that the components of the partnership model articulated by Davis et al. (2002) would also explain the essential components of effective inter-agency work.

Several suggestions exist for enhancing collaboration across all levels in the field of adolescent casework, including joint training, regular forums with agencies working together, service protocols, role definition, clear assessment and case management guidelines (Worrall-Davies et al. 2004).

Workforce issues

The study findings highlight the complex and specialized nature of child protection work with adolescent and the need for adequate, and appropriate training and support for the practitioners. In writing about the practicalities of working with adolescents, Malekoff (2005) emphasizes that a young person’s own insecurities, fears and anxieties may evoke uncomfortable feelings for the worker, who feels inadequate and ill-equipped to assist the young person.

Finding adequate time to work with adolescents was one of the key concerns raised by child protection practitioners in this study. The literature reported that working with adolescents, as well as with their family, can be equivalent to working with two clients or cases (Smith & Donovan 2003). Counting work with both parents/caregivers and the young person needs to be considered in caseload allocation. Otherwise, working with parents can be compromised, as it is time-consuming and may not be considered a core activity (Smith & Donovan 2003).
It was also evident that those practitioners who worked in one of the three specialist adolescent services believed they had more opportunity and greater management support to build a relationship with a young person over time. They were also more likely to demonstrate flexibility in their practice and to consider the multiple ways of understanding or constructing adolescence.

Limitations of the research

It must be acknowledged that this is a small qualitative study of a convenience sample of practitioners working, or considered to have expertise in working, with adolescents. As such, the study’s findings cannot be generalized to all child protection practitioners. The participants were casework practitioners who gave their perspectives and experiences of working with adolescents and their families. To gain a more comprehensive understanding of the nature and impact of the relationship, and of the most effective strategies for working with adolescents, it is important that research be done with young people themselves and their families as well as with the other agencies and professionals who provide services for adolescents.

CONCLUSION

This paper has reported the findings of the study of child protection practitioners’ perceptions and practices of working with adolescents and their families. The analysis highlights the central role that child protection practitioners play in coordinating services and interventions for children and young people who are at risk and, at times, highly distressed. The findings also highlight the sensitive nature of this work and the need for child protection practitioners to develop effective relationships with adolescents, their families and other agencies.

It is clear that further research directly testing the effectiveness of particular casework strategies or approaches to case management is warranted. Further, it is imperative that the research examines the perceptions and experiences of children and young people, and their families who are receiving child protection services and interventions.

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REFERENCES


**NOTE**