

Open Learn: Learning Space audio transcript
K315_1: Becoming a social work practitioner
Anne Farmer

Commentary

In this short extract, we'll hear from Anne Farmer, talking about her role as chair of the conference. Her job involves communicating with the different agencies and service users involved. Here she explains some of the preparation that goes into doing this.

Anne Farmer

I think the way that good case conferences are managed is through, I think, preparation. So I will always make a good attempt to try and see a family before a conference, to go through the report with them so that, if there's areas they're not sure, or they're not clear about, or they don't agree with, and language is written in a way which is jargon, or professional language they don't understand, I try and make sure that they're clear about what's being said and what are the key issues in the report.

Commentary

During the conference itself, part of the chair's job is to handle two languages - the language used by social workers in the report, which is understood by the professionals involved and includes professional jargon which often uses more technical or professional shorthand words and phrases, and the ordinary language which we all use. Where both professionals and service users are involved in a meeting, the participants have to try and strike a balance between the needs of the professionals to share information, and the obligation to involve service users in the process. This is not always easy, and achieving this balance is the conference chair's particular responsibility.

Anne Farmer

I think it's quite difficult to make sure that parents understand absolutely everything, because conferences ... you know, you are working to timescales and you, you know ... child protection conferences should be reasonably tightly chaired so that you get through all the elements of the conference. But I try and make sure that I see the parents ... that we lay some ground rules with them about making sure they know they've got a voice. They know that they can, you know, pick up if they're not sure, or they want something clarified ... that they will have an opportunity to speak, that, if they want a break and they want to go and consult with an advocate, or they want to speak to the social worker, they can also do those things.

Anne Farmer (contd.)

So that there is a sense in which ... you can't negate all professional language, but that you make sure that parents and young people see themselves as part of the process really. I think it is about ensuring that you give parents a voice in the conference; that you give them permission to say if they're not sure, or if they don't understand ... that you ... you sum up frequently, which is often the style I used as a chair of a child protection conference. So, for example, if the social worker presented the report, then I would sum up in two or three sentences, "So this is what you're saying, this is the essence of it". So that, if there is some sense in which someone's not clear, hopefully my summing up will give them, you know, an opportunity to realise what's being said.

Commentary

As well as demystifying language, the chair is there to ensure that everyone has an equal voice, that service users are not excluded, and that what they say is heard.

Anne Farmer

The model I try and keep in my head is that child protection conferences can be a bit like a football match. We're on one ... with one team you have a set of professional players who've played together very regularly, know each other well and have a good understanding of the game. And, on the other side, you have a group of individuals who know each other, but have never played football in their lives, so they're not terribly sure of what they're doing. And they've all come together to play this match. If you keep that in your head, then you can really understand how it might feel to be a parent at a case conference, when you've never been before.

If parents disagree with the social worker's report, or any of the reports from other professionals, then we would try and minute their disagreement so that that was actually contained within the notes. I try and listen to what people have got to say and whether they disagree, and there's some factual errors that we've made, or whether it's a disagreement around the perception of an event or an assessment of risk.

But, at the end of the day, the reason that everybody's gathered in that room is to try and ensure that a child is safeguarded in some way or another, whether it's through a multi agency action plan to enable that child to remain at home, or whether it's through some other form of recommendation. And you want to work with parents ... you want to engage with them to enable them to make the appropriate changes. But, nonetheless, professionals don't convene child protection conferences lightly. You have to have evidence, and that's presented in the social worker's report. You have to be able to ensure that, through the risk indicators, there's a clear understanding of what ... you know ... risks may be attached to that child.

Commentary

Anne Farmer clearly explains that her role in the conference is to facilitate the communication of professional concerns about risks. It's likely that there may be disagreements, and these have to be recognised, acknowledged and discussed. Acknowledgement of disagreements is a feature of social work relationships. However, good social work practice requires the maintenance of working relationships through difficulties, and this creates scope for understanding and positive changes.