# Changing the Narrative Resources and Structures Day 26 April

## Reflections on previous day.

A developmental orientation feels very different with the potential for a transformation of systems. Important focus on the adaptive aspects of children’s developmental responses to difficulties rather than pathologising them. The balance between research and lived experience was welcomed. Several participants said the day had changed how they engaged in their current work and had discussed it with colleagues. A need to combine ACES and a developmental orientation was expressed.

## Themes

### Joy, hope and humanity

The structure of the day brought the importance of joy to the fore. From every group there was discussion of the importance of allowing for the possibility of love within the system. Some people commented that it was the first time in their professional lives anyone had asked them about the joy they found in their work. People emphasised the need to retain hope and belief in the work and that there are already some positives happening. We need to identify and celebrate the good things that are already happening and find ways of capturing what is good so that it can be replicated/scaled up (implementation science). There was a continuing emphasis on the power of the micro as well as the macro. We need to recognise opportunities for joy and nurture wherever in the system this can be provided and not get trapped by convention or tradition.

## Systems and resources

There is no simple answer – it is important to recognise the complexity of the interacting systems around looked after children. Not only is culture change needed at a systemic level we need a societal shift in our view of childhood. The point was made that as we get more human the system appears more inhuman and inflexible.

We have systems that sometimes enact stress and pain rather than respond helpfully and our interventions can impact negatively on children. Much decision making is financially driven (e.g. the procurement model for placing children outside authorities). This means a focus on using the cheapest services and placement moves being driven by financial concerns. Currently children have to fit into the boxes available rather than an alternative environment being created that fits their developmental need. It is important to develop processes and procedures that focus on individual children. The system needs to become flexible and responsive to the needs of children and families. This needs to be embedded rather than dependent on individual social workers. Various examples of systemic problems were highlighted: rigidity of age parameters; access to services only possible with either extreme behaviour or stigmatising labels; creation of vulnerability by removing or reducing services when things are ‘going well’.

At the moment there is often a focus on agency / organisational needs /protection rather than needs of the child and family. Anxiety about public scrutiny and failure leads to risk aversion. There needs to be a shift from risk management which distorts normal development trajectories to an emphasis on developing risk competence across the system including among professionals, children and families. There are still many myths current about what looked after children can be allowed to do without bureaucratic constraints - despite clear examples of practice that challenges these myths, these appear resistant to change. Maybe it is more comfortable to avoid risk rather than challenge such myths on the basis of children’s developmental needs.

There is a strong culture of blaming individuals or teams in the event of problems occurring rather than examining what went wrong in the system that prevented the possibility of good practice. There was a strong desire to learn from daily practice not just serious case reviews and also to learn from those who are flourishing rather than just from problems. The effects of scrutiny/ audit / blame can be seen in the over focus on paper work which ‘strangles’ good practice resulting in the child getting lost. Examples given of ‘polishing’ for inspections because of the anxiety created by audit and inspection culture. Although the importance of evidence based practice was recognised there were concerns that this has led to an unhelpful focus on rigid outcomes such as expected attainment levels in education. Rather than just having a focus on counting outcomes we need to recognise and value people’s whole stories.

A developmental orientation needs to be used by ALL services. There is a problem with silo working that is preventing an integrated approach. Even I.T. cannot talk across boundaries. It is important to join up work, culture, training and understanding. We need to appreciate the nuanced nature of every role and how they interlink. Currently there is inconsistency at national and local level and often there appear to be conflicting agendas. We need to understand each other’s roles and stop blaming other professionals. Relationships should not only be at the centre of the work with children and families but also at the centre of working with other professionals.

## Professionals

### Recruitment and training

There was an emphasis on recruiting the right people and doing so on the basis of their values and attributes. There is also a need for shared values, knowledge and training (professional integrated training) across the workforce while maintaining distinct responsibilities and skill bases. In particular we need a shared knowledge base about development and moving beyond a superficial awareness of attachment theory.

### Support for workforce

This work involves tolerating the intolerable and it is essential that staff anxieties are recognised and contained. Some people talked about desensitised workers and managers and wondered how to promote a resilient and joyful workforce. Hot desking, for example, is not conducive to the developmental orientation. There was an emphasis on the need to define and be explicit about good practice – developing prompts/practice profiles- and instituting regular observation of practice and feedback. The importance of helping staff to develop through opportunities for supervision/ coaching/ reflection was recognised. Developmental orientation is about staff as well as children and families.

### Practice change

There was a strong emphasis on the need to shift from only concentrating on deficits to recognising, celebrating and consolidating strengths. In particular, we need to ditch deficit-based language and the use of acronyms and stigmatising labels. There was a desire to recapture a belief in the impact of individual relationships/ choices/ change. We need to work out how the system can support staff to go ‘above and beyond’ and challenge systemic barriers to this. It is important to create an attitude that asks what does this child family need rather than what is our/my remit? We also all need to find kindly but courageous ways to challenge each other’s decision making when we fail to place the child’s developmental needs at the centre.

## Family

We need to recognise and respond to the developmental needs of families/parents not just the child. It is important to find appropriate ways to explain what is meant by a developmental orientation to parents and carers. Interactions with families need to move away from judgement and blame to increase support and understanding. Families may not know how to change and we don’t help them to learn. The importance of family involvement for children living away from home was emphasised, and, in particular, recognising and honouring sibling relationships as well as those with parents.

## Stability

Stability was seen as fundamental for children’s development but it was recognised that the current system institutionalises and normalises disruption of relationships. Rather than dealing with difficulties by moving children there should be much greater investment in maintaining placements. The expectation should be that carers/ workers claim children in a genuine and personal way. No child should move unless absolutely necessary for the protection of the child or others. Financial reasons should never be the driver for moving placements. If a child has to move then the transition should be managed sensitively and important relationships respected and continued. The possibility of life-long links between children and adults should be welcomed rather than treated with suspicion.

### Learning and creativity

Educational stability and the developmental opportunities of education are crucial for looked after children. Relationships with teachers can be crucial in recovery. Education should be understood in its widest sense and the importance of sport, creativity and the arts for development and recovery should be recognised. Children’s talents and interests should be identified and cherished. We need to identify what is working well and consolidate and build on this. There is currently no sense of urgency about this e.g. not sourcing music lessons for a child with a passion and talent for piano. It is also important to notice and identify problems early so that they can be rectified – no child should leave primary school unable to read or do maths. That is a joint responsibility for carers and teachers- not just schools! Having high aspirations for looked after children is essential, there are some systemic assumptions that mean that many children do not achieve their full potential. School can be the space in which resilience can be developed and built (e.g. South Lanarkshire FAIR) but can also be toxic and destructive if children are not known and understood.

### Health

There is widespread lack of understanding of difficulties of engagement/ access. Children can be excluded from services because of pain based behaviour or failure to attend. We need to find ways to create flexible responses that build in extra chances (e.g. free dental treatment up to age 25). There are often inflexible transition points to adult services that means that children’s developmental stages are not recognised. The current discourse around ACES provides both opportunities and risks. The growing understanding of the importance of difficulties in childhood and their continued impact throughout the life course has provoked interest and concern from both the government and the public. The rather simplistic approach of counting the number of different ACEs, however, runs the risk of minimising the impacts of the depths of trauma and disadvantage that many looked after children have encountered. Looked after children often differ from the wider population not only because they have experienced a greater number of ACES but also because their experience has been qualitatively different.

### Child’s voice

Across all services there was a recognition that we need to do more than listen to children. If we fail to respond to children’s views or requests, then our listening is tokenistic. In particular, there was an emphasis on asking children from our earliest engagement with them who/what is really important to you? Although relationships with parents are often the most important in children’s lives there may be many other relationships that have provided safety, love, developmental opportunities or fun. Even relationships that may have difficulties may still be of immense importance. Moreover, relationships may not only be with people- family pets or other animals may have provided safety or particular places may have special meaning to children. Attending children’s hearings or reviews is not sufficient opportunity for children to be included in decision making.