



# Service users' perceptions of the Irish Child Protection System

## 1. What is the study's background?

This study was funded by the Office of the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs (now the Department of Children and Youth Affairs) under the National Children's Research Programme. The study was undertaken by Dr. Helen Buckley, Sadhbh Whelan, Nicola Carr and Clóna Murphy of the School of Social Work and Social Policy, Trinity College, Dublin.\* The report was independently peer-reviewed and published in 2008.

## 2. What is the study's purpose?

This study aimed to explore the views of young people and adults who used the child protection services. The specific objectives were:

- » to examine service users' experiences of their first contact with the child protection services and ascertain if there was congruence between their perception of child protection concerns/risk and their perception of how child protection staff understood those concerns;
- » to examine service users' experiences of assessment, investigation of reported concerns, understanding of the tasks required of them and their perception of genuine participation and involvement in the process;
- » to explore service users' perceptions of the quality of the child protection service;
- » to examine the degree of inclusiveness experienced by service users;
- » to explore the degree to which young people and families considered that their needs had been met.

This briefing note summarises the method of research, key findings, conclusions and recommendations of the study. The full report is available on [www.dcyia.ie](http://www.dcyia.ie)

## 3. How was the study undertaken?

The methods employed were designed to achieve the above objectives. In-depth interviews were conducted in 16 different counties in Ireland with 67 service users, including 54 adults and 13 young people.

## 4. What are the key findings?

### 4.1 Initial contact with the child protection system

The research findings demonstrate that most service users viewed the child protection system in a stereotypically negative manner, seeing it as a powerful and somewhat hostile institution, to be avoided if possible. Many carried misperceptions about the power of social workers to remove children from their parents' care. While a number of interviewees spoke of getting fast responses from the child protection services, others were critical about delays in intervention. Victims of domestic violence appeared to find it difficult to have their concerns taken seriously and found the system difficult to access. There were examples of positive experiences, some of which represented a considerable shift from an initially hostile relationship with the services. However, stories of delays, perceived threats and feelings of abandonment tended to dominate service users' early experiences of engagement with the child protection system.

\* The views expressed in this report are those of the authors and not necessarily those of the Department of Children and Youth Affairs.

## 4.2 Investigation and assessment

In common with earlier research, this study found a high level of disagreement between service users' concerns about their children and the concerns that they perceived to be held by child protection staff. A number of people felt that they had been harshly and unfairly judged. However, there were also several examples of positive working alliances, mediated by a helpful and empathetic approach on the part of practitioners.

## 4.3 Child protection plans

While there was no evidence that service users actively participated in the development of formal child protection plans, most appeared to have a clear idea of tasks that they were expected to perform and the likely consequences for them if they did not comply.

## 4.4 Experiences of out-of-home care

The majority of parents interviewed whose children had been placed in care were satisfied with the placements and considered that establishing a rapport with their children's carers was particularly important. Some parents indicated that they did not have a clear understanding of the legal and administrative processes involved in care proceedings and tended to perceive social work decisions as being unchallengeable.

Young people who had spent time in out-of-home care emphasized the importance of open and honest communication to assist them in coming to terms with past trauma and to develop their sense of identity. Changes of social worker caused unsettling disruptions in a context where relationships with their workers were crucial. Young people who were in the process of leaving care also raised concerns about the future service provision they would receive, indicating that leaving care provision still remains a pertinent issue.

## 4.5 Perceptions of a quality service

The importance and centrality of the relationships forged between themselves and practitioners received considerable emphasis from service users. Qualities that promoted positive and respectful alliances were identified as trust, friendliness, empathy, open-mindedness, being believed and understood, and being encouraged. There were many examples of

good relationships based on these components, but also some where interactions had been undermined by what service users perceived as bossiness, intrusiveness, indifference, unreliability and lack of respect. An aspect of practice that was frequently raised by service users was the lack of respect that they experienced when their telephone calls and messages were not returned and when workers were difficult to access, especially at critical moments. Accessibility and reliability of staff were considered very important elements of a quality service.

## 4.6 Inclusiveness

The study particularly sought to explore how far fathers are directly engaged with by workers and the degree of choice and involvement they experienced. Some fathers considered that they had been treated differently, either by not having their concerns taken seriously or by not being fully informed about child protection interventions that were taking place. Some mothers whose partners had abused children felt that workers held unrealistic expectations of them. A number of service users complained that child protection reports made in the context of custody disputes were not taken seriously by the services.

## 4.7 User involvement

While parents were being routinely invited to child protection conferences, many of their accounts did not reflect genuine participation as much as considerable discomfort. Experiences of family welfare conferences were more positive, although there were only three examples to demonstrate this. A significant number of interviewees had sought their records under the Freedom of Information legislation, which gave a sense that service users need to rely on formal and somewhat cumbersome methods to gain access to information written about them. The lack of publicised information on the complaints process was considered by some to be a deliberate ploy to discourage them from availing of it. Some expressed apprehension that complaining might compromise their situation; others felt it would be a pointless exercise.

## 4.8 Overall satisfaction with the service

A number of service users spoke of the practical help and therapeutic input they had received from both the statutory and voluntary child protection services. While tangible interventions were generally rated highly, some service users voiced their dissatisfaction

with unresponsiveness, delays and unreturned telephone calls on the part of staff, which left them feeling abandoned and insulted. Some pointed out that a friendly and empathetic response from workers would probably have met their need for support. The importance of workers' skills and knowledge in various areas was emphasized, particularly in respect of domestic violence, substance abuse and child sexual abuse (especially in the context of custody disputes). Service users were aware of some of the nuances, dynamics and complexities in these contexts, but considered that many of them were disregarded by or unknown to workers.

## 5. What are the conclusions?

The study reached the following overall conclusions:

1. **The statutory child protection system is perceived as unsympathetic, powerful and intimidating.** Not all children who come to the attention of the child protection services are in dangerous circumstances and development of a less intimidating and more proportionate response would be beneficial. The lack of public information about the child protection system is not helpful and tends to fuel fear and feed into the poor image described by service users in this study.
2. **Service users define the quality of a service principally in terms of the manner in which it is delivered.** Central to this is responsiveness and accessibility of workers and attention to issues such as returning telephone calls and punctuality. 'Good practice' was also defined by service users in terms of consistency and reliability of services.
3. **Young people primarily want the child protection system to keep them safe.** They also want services on time and to have workers that are mature, experienced, knowledgeable and friendly.
4. **Service users who are victims of domestic violence want their concerns to be taken more seriously.** There were perceptions of gendered practice by both male and female service users, particularly when child abuse allegations were made in the context of acrimonious separations and custody disputes.

## 6. What are the recommendations?

A number of recommendations arise from the research, as follows:

### 1. Recommendations for policy-makers

- » Consideration should be given to the formalising and resourcing of *differential responses* to reports about children, distinguishing between those where children are seriously at risk and those where children are vulnerable and families are likely to benefit from a more welfare-oriented therapeutic approach.
- » Consideration should be given to establishing a *specific service to deal with allegations* made in the context of separation and custody disputes.
- » The provision of services should be *consistent across the country* as far as possible.

### 2. Recommendations for senior managers

- » Information about the child protection system should be *disseminated to inform the public* about specific services. In addition, a convenient and accessible means to avail of services should be provided, such as a centralised toll-free telephone number.
- » Specific measures should be taken to *encourage workers to utilise current theories and research evidence*.
- » Policies regarding the *recording, management and sharing of information* should be established.
- » Consideration should be given to the implications of categorising assessment or investigation *outcomes as 'inconclusive'*, given the enduring and negative connotations of this term for service users whose involvement in alleged child abuse has never been proven, particularly when the allegation arises out of a malicious or erroneous claim.
- » Where children are placed in *out-of-home care*, a protocol should be established whereby specific information about their rights and those of their caregivers is provided, as well as information about Court and legal processes. This may be best achieved through an advocacy service.



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Check out [www.dcyia.ie](http://www.dcyia.ie) for full report of study

### 3. Recommendations for front-line practitioners

- » Practitioners should *demonstrate sensitivity* to the impact that involvement with the child protection service has on children and families.
- » Practitioners should be cognisant of the *importance of the relationship* formed between themselves and service users, and its implications for an effective outcome. Respect for service users should be demonstrated by timely responses to requests for services, including returning telephone calls promptly and keeping punctually to arrangements.
- » Practitioners should endeavour to *keep abreast of current knowledge* about specific topics and apply it to their practice where relevant.

## 7. What are the benefits of the study?

The study should be of benefit to all organisations that provide services to children and families, particularly those in the statutory sector. It provides a useful perspective from the receiving end of services. It should inform policy-makers about gaps in service and about the most effective type of service to provide. It should also inform senior managers about the importance of disseminating positive information about their services and encourage them to facilitate good practice by ensuring that staff have access to current knowledge and information, and implement good recording practices. Finally, it should also be of use to front-line staff, reminding them of the value of helping relationships in their work and of the importance of demonstrating respect, accessibility and reliability to families and young people who become involved with the child protection service.