

MSP briefing for Members' Debate -Thursday 13 January 2022: Championing the Right to Holistic Family Support

Key issues for Children 1st

Children 1st wants to see **family support available as a right to all families**. Our vision for family support is easily accessible, relationship-based, and holistic – working alongside families to identify their strengths and build on these to address their challenges.

- **Families should know what support is available** to them and how to access it
- Families should be able to get support **based on what their support needs are, for as long as they need it**.
- Support should always **start with the strengths that already exist within the family unit, and build on those**

The Scottish Government's commitment to a [£500m "Whole Family Wellbeing Fund" and to investing 5% of community-based health and social care spend on preventative whole family support](#) is very welcome. **Detail is needed on how this investment will help to ensure the government delivers the commitments made when it accepted the report of the Independent Care Review - The Promise**. In particular, a detailed timeline for delivery of this commitment. A key part of any investment in family support should be that it supports sustainable long-term services for families, including through multi-year funding rather than the current trend for single year funding.

The pandemic and associated restrictions (including lockdown) have impacted on every child and every family. **For some families, especially those who were already experiencing trauma and adversity, it has pushed them to crisis point**. In just one of our family wellbeing services, **the number of families we work alongside has increased by 50% between 1st June 2020 and 31st May 2021** compared to the same period in the previous year. Children and their families need to be able to access support now.

About Children 1st

Children 1st supports children in Scotland to live in safe, loving families and to build strong communities. As well as providing holistic family support and trauma recovery in neighbourhoods across Scotland, we work with children, young people, and their families to uphold and progress their rights and to strengthen and improve the systems that are there to support them. We are proud to be a member of the Coalition of Care and Support Providers in Scotland (CCPS) and would associate Children 1st with the briefing for this debate provided to you by CCPS.

You will find a case study – Ava and Emily's story – at the end of this briefing, to bring to life what holistic whole family support looks and feels like in practice.

For further information please contact Vonnie Sandlan, Policy Manager:
vonnie.sandlan@children1st.org.uk // 07401 278778

The difference that holistic whole family support makes

In February 2020, the Independent Care Review published its final report, [The Promise](#), which was accepted in full by the Scottish Government. **A core recommendation was the need to shift public spending away from dealing with the consequences of failure and inequality, to investing in preventative action** which enables children and families to thrive.

Holistic whole family support is simultaneously very simple to explain, and complicated. Quite simply, it is an approach rooted in relationships, which puts children and their families at the centre, where the strengths of the whole family are identified by skilled, compassionate professionals working alongside them and where these strengths are built upon. This support is delivered in the communities where children and their families live and works alongside children and their families to support them to recover from trauma and distress and to build resilience for the future. This support includes practical, emotional and financial support as needed by the family. **Children 1st wants to see family support available to all families as a right, through a no-wrong-door approach.**

We have found that for the children we work with, consistent relationship-based support from a sensitive and skilled professional that helps get to the root of the problem. And we know from our service delivery experience that the best outcomes are secured for children when their whole family is supported, when family relationships are nurtured and when children can recover from distress or trauma, supported in their family with a full understanding of how to meet their needs.

But we have heard from the children and families who we work alongside about the difficulty they experienced in finding any kind of support when they looked for it. All too often, families tell us the services and support that is available are confusing, inaccessible, siloed and disjointed and that they feel lost between the gaps or feel 'parked' on waiting lists for inappropriate more acute services when there is no alternative. Families who have come to us for help often have already tried to get help from their GP, the school counsellor and other universal support services which have not been able to meet their needs.

Children and their families also tell us that at the point where the child's distress has been recognised when they have reached for help, and they have been referred to CAMHS, that they then endure a lengthy wait for assessment and/or treatment, but with no support during that period – after their child's distress has already reached such a significant level that help has been sought.

Children 1st believes that CAMHS offer incredible help to children who are unwell and that CAMHS provision is specialist, valuable and required. **But we also believe that for the majority of children presented to GPs because they are distressed, their answer to recovery lies not in a clinical pathway, but instead in trauma-informed relational support**, including building peer connections in the community.

Our work is about keeping connections between family members at all stages of childhood, mindful of different developmental stages that children and young people navigate on their route to adulthood.

Children 1st approach

Building on what children and their families have told us they need, our approach has been to work with Health and Social Care Partnerships to develop social and relational models of support in partnership with primary care professionals (e.g. GPs) where children and their families can quickly access early support.

This support includes practical help. To illustrate this, Children 1st currently uses our unrestricted income to fund a small money advice service which supports families with money and debt management. In 2020/21, our specialist money advice colleagues worked with 183 families to put £1.2m back into their household budgets by claiming benefits that the family was entitled to as well as negotiating management of debts so that income was not being immediately redirected to servicing repayments.

The pandemic and associated restrictions (especially lockdown) have impacted on every child and every family. For some families, especially those who were already experiencing trauma and adversity, it has pushed them to crisis point while at the same time removing their access to their friends, family and other sources of support.

This has led to a substantial increase in demand for our services. To provide an example, in just one of our family wellbeing services, the number of families we work alongside has increased by 50% between 1st June 2020 and 31st May 2021 compared to the same period in the previous year. This service is also working with 80 families who are waiting for intensive family support to address challenges to emotional wellbeing. Pre-pandemic, this service was able to see children and their families within two weeks.

Children 1st believe that children and their families are not getting the support they need because of the gap between what is set out in policy and legislation, and what is actually delivered on the ground. Therefore, what is required is a new, nationally-driven approach to make holistic, whole family support available to every family in their local community, as soon as they reach for it.

Children 1st Parentline – our national online and phone-based family support offer

Children 1st Parentline makes family support available to everyone when they need it. It offers parents and carers immediate help delivered by highly skilled and trauma informed volunteers and team members. This includes advice, ongoing support via the phone and online methods offering emotional, practical and financial support through our trauma informed money advice service. Our learning from one of our community-based services was that while Parentline was offered as an initial support, it was often so positive that it met family's needs without requiring escalation to acute services. Where required, Parentline can also be a safe route to more direct and local support.

Over the last year, concerns about children's mental health and wellbeing was one of the main reasons that parents or carers contacted Parentline, in approximately half of all calls received.

AVA AND EMILY'S STORY – what family support can deliver

Children 1st is one of the partners in a new multi-disciplinary community hub in Aberdeen city, called Fit Like?

The hub was created with children and their families, alongside partner organisations, to provide safe, secure and open-hearted relationships which allowed for the provision of emotional and practical support to families in Aberdeen through a clear and single point of entry, “no wrong door”. Families contribute to the ongoing design and development of the hub so that they can easily get what they need, at the time they need it.

This approach puts children at the centre of services and recognises that when families get early support children do better. It is rooted in children's rights and delivers on the recommendations of the Independent Care Review - the Promise.

Working together through the hub, we seek to build on the strengths already present in families to improve the mental wellbeing of children and their families across Aberdeen.

Ava and Emily

“I feel so guilty that I didn't notice how ill Ava was because I was so worried about other bits of my life and sometimes in the past I've felt judged by services.”

Emily

Children do well when their family does well. For many children and young people the roots of their emotional distress lie in the challenges and unresolved trauma that exists within their wider family. By taking a recovery focused approach which supports the whole family and empowers them to address wider challenges, Fit Like? strengthens family relationships to keep children where they are safe and loved. For young people like Ava strong supportive relationships with family and trusted professionals are key to improving mental health.

Ava is 14, lives with her Mum, Emily, and loves animals and art. Ava has little contact with her Dad but a good relationship with her Gran. She has an eating disorder, low self-esteem and lacks confidence. Ava's physical health had been very poor, requiring significant medical input to avoid further deterioration. Ava felt alone and isolated and rarely left home. She does not consistently attend school. Emily experienced depression and was in significant debt, having lost her job. Emily's partner was abusive and emotionally and financially controlling.

HOW FIT LIKE? ARE WORKING WITH AVA AND EMILY

Ava has weekly online contact with her school nurse, who is helping her make good body image, nutrition, and exercise choices. The family are getting money advice support from Children 1st. As well as supporting the family with their entitlements, the Money Wellbeing Worker is supporting Emily so that she feels ready to address her debt. After being supported to reflect on the impact of her relationship with her partner on herself and Ava, Emily has ended it.

The Hub connected her with the Police for reassurance and safety advice. Ava is meeting a Children 1st Family Support Worker outside her home and through a trauma informed, flexible approach to support, Ava is growing in her social confidence and self- belief.

THE FIT LIKE? TEAM AROUND AVA AND EMILY

- Education
- Health (School Nurse)
- CAMHS
- Children 1st
- Creative Learning

WHAT'S NEXT FOR AVA, EMILY AND FIT LIKE?

The Hub will support Ava with a referral to an orthodontist. The Hub are exploring creative and innovative ways to harness Ava's love of dogs and the confidence they give her to help her to increasingly cope with social interactions. Family relationships will be strengthened through continued Children 1st support, helping the family to repair and recover from past trauma.

Through youth work, creative learning and teaching support Ava will be empowered to develop confidence and self-efficacy.