Bilingual Children/Monolingual Parents: a study of young people’s experiences of interpreting - Summary

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Background Information
Theme: Children and Families
Region/Nation: The study was conducted in LEASE region
Funded by: The Economic and Social Research Council
Carried out in collaboration with: London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine

Objectives of work
The study set out to explore what young people thought about the work that they did interpreting for parents and others who were non-English speaking, particularly in health service settings such as visiting the doctor or dentist. The study population were 76 young people aged between 10 and 18 who had some experience of interpreting for adults. In addition to speaking English, they spoke one or more of the following languages: Vietnamese, Chinese, Cantonese, Sylheti, Bengali, Kurdish, Turkish, Albanian or Serbo-Croat. 27 were born in the UK, and 49 were born elsewhere. The interviews were held in settings such as community centres and youth clubs.

Synopsis of findings
The young people we talked to had a varied range of experiences. These included helping parents read letters that came home, making appointments on the telephone, accompanying family members to hospital appointments and helping other members of the community with registering with doctors, talking to council officials or visiting solicitors. The young people who spoke Bengali, Sylheti, Vietnamese or Chinese mostly interpreted for other members of their families, but those more recently arrived in the UK also had experiences of helping others in their community. Sometimes young people had to help with interpreting because it was difficult to find professional interpreters when they were needed. In other cases, families preferred to have their own children to help, rather than relying on strangers who did not know them.

Key messages
For the young people, interpreting brought many benefits. These included: the opportunity to improve skills in both languages spoken, the feeling of making a positive contribution to the family or community and, for some, an opportunity to feel closer to parents. A few said they would like to use their language skills in future careers. There were also some disadvantages. Some young people did not like missing school or other activities to help. When interpreting was difficult, it could be an unpleasant experience. It was difficult when interpreters did not know the 'right' words in one of the languages, or when the person you were going to see (such as the doctor) expected you to 'persuade' as well as translate, or seemed irritated that you were there. Also, some young people said parents made their job harder, by talking at the same time, or interrupting.
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