Credwch mewn plant Believe in children

Barnardo's Cymru

Introduction

The health crisis and the lockdown period have, inevitably, precipitated additional stresses and challenges for children and young people. The combination of the pandemic and sudden, challenging changes to family economic circumstances have been frightening and destabilising. We have been as deeply concerned as others about the safety of children we now only see online, or on a phone screen. We have worried about those we are not hearing about that will be at risk or in real danger.

Barnardo's, like many other organisations, has adapted service support and interventions to be suitable for delivery online or over the phone during the Covid-19 crisis. We are aware that much of this adaptation is just sticking plaster until face to face work can recommence. However we are also alert to the fact that there is learning in this crisis that must be captured, to future proof our work with children, young people and families in the longer term.

Some children and young people have experienced respite from factors that negatively impact on their wellbeing. Issues such as bullying, anxiety inducing social environments for autistic children, and negative peer pressure and intimidation in the community for those at risk of criminal exploitation have been removed. There have been different opportunities to engage with online education and online groups, which would have been hard to get to, or hard to manage in their physical manifestation. Parents and carers, who previously worked long hours or were preoccupied, have been available for their children. Barnardo's has set up a focused Innovation Programme with four project work streams to harness this learning going forward.

Physical and mental health of children and young people:

1. ***Children have lost access to supportive social networks, which has undermined their sense of wellbeing and exacerbated some existing emotional and mental health issues.*** Older young people have been particularly vulnerable to the isolation, especially care leavers and those living away from family. Being at home with family, particularly where there have been longstanding difficulties in relationships, has created tensions and resulted in increases in youth homelessness. Our First Episode Psychosis Service in Cardiff (FEPS) and our Golau Service on Anglesey both address the emotional

resilience of young people through interventions which include socialising, friendships and meaningful contact with others. These interventions are clearly difficult to access currently, so both these services have adapted their service offers to maximise the support they can give by reaching out to individuals and families.

2. ***In relation to Covid-19*** - Children are concerned about the safety of family members and families are anxious about going out, going shopping and to local services such as GP surgeries. ***Economic security*** - Families where economic pressures have come in the wake of the health crisis have experienced increased levels of tension and stress played out in arguments, heightened displays of emotions and parental alcohol misuse.

3. Where the source of a child's the mental health problems was located in social or academic aspects of school life, these children have experienced a respite which has benefited their mental health in the short term. We envisage that a return to school will prove particularly challenging for these children and additional support and careful planning will be required to facilitate this.

4. In some families, where parents have previously worked long hours and are now furloughed, or are not working, time has been spent together providing an opportunity to strengthen relationships with their children.

Vulnerable and disadvantaged children:

1. The ***economic impact*** of the crisis has been a huge source of anxiety as work has been lost and families have had to claim Universal Credit. Children are directly impacted by living with this anxiety and fear and the very real threats to the security of house and home.

2. In services where we support families with ***children with special educational needs*** we have experienced a range of issues. Children and young people on the autistic spectrum, or with learning difficulties, have struggled with the changes of routine arising from their school closing and their education and care moving to school hubs. Many have found it challenging to understand what is happening and what it means for them and their families. It has been very difficult for families caring for these children and young people to have them home during the lockdown with little routine and the brief respite of school and support services. Children and families are missing the hours of weekly 'respite' when children were accessing support groups and individual support via the service. Some children and young people, who had trouble engaging with 'live' groups and learning, have been easier to access via online routes.

3. Our services are ***working with multi-agency partners*** in localities to support these families. Some Early Help Hubs have adapted to address emergency food need, delivering school meals to homes etc. Our services have supported families to access school meals and food banks as part of this joint work. In areas where our services have lost the professional groupings that usually make the referrals, service managers have reached out to key professionals to re-design the referral routes and/or publicised our services directly to families so that they can self-refer.

4. The pandemic has exposed the vulnerable families who do not having ***access to digital technology*** beyond a basic phone. Barnardo's Cymru have been using voluntary funds to provide technology such as smartphones so that families can remain in touch, pay their bills and manage the practicalities of their changed circumstances. Services have also been supporting families to access equipment for their children from schools and supporting families with setting up internet connection and purchasing stationary and providing access to printers.

5. Vulnerable ***single parents*** and families where there is shared parenting have experienced pressures and challenges. Single parents are more reliant on extended family, friends and services for support in raising their children.

6. ***Young carers*** have been affected by a variety of issues ranging from adapting to deterioration in the health of family members, economic challenges due to loss of parental income and digital exclusion challenging their ability to connect to learning. However overall young carers have been temporarily relieved from keeping on top of both the demands of domestic chores and caring for a loved one at home combined with school work.

Social care and safeguarding:

1. Our services are experiencing a general reduction in referrals which is a grave concern from a safeguarding perspective, possibly due in part to schools being closed and the usual professional network not being around the child or young person. There has been an increase in some of our family support services.

2. Delivering services via ***online and telephone communication has compromised the ability to safeguard robustly***. Even when children are seen or spoken to separately from their parents and carers it's harder to judge how they are being cared for and the quality of the relationship with the parent. Services have attempted to create opportunities for private conversations with children and young people within the context of lockdown.

3. Some users of **schools counselling services, and Families First counselling services**, have been happy to continue to access the support online or on the phone. However, those that are now at home will not always have the same degree of privacy they had at school. Moreover, as school counselling is a confidential service, where older children can get support without the need to gain consent from parents, then this opportunity to report safeguarding issues has been lost.

4. We are concerned about **rising levels of domestic violence** and welcome the Welsh Governments recent 'Home shouldn't be a place of fear' campaign. **We know that children will be experiencing abuse in these households** and that awareness of this is being promoted via the NSPCC's Childline campaign. We recently received additional funding from the Home Office to run our family approach to domestic abuse in four LA's in Gwent, in addition to Newport. We expect to see increased referrals into these services in the longer term – though at the moment referrals remain low.

5. School hubs were intended to facilitate support for the most vulnerable pupils and clearly there has been concern that attendance has been low. Families are concerned to keep their children, and themselves, safe from the virus. **From a safeguarding perspective it's important that we get children back into schools,** but clearly there is a complicated balance of health considerations to address alongside this imperative. We are concerned that some families may use Covid-19 to keep the social workers and services from the door.

6. Young people accessing our Divert service in Newport, which supports those at high risk of entering the criminal justice system, have had the opportunity to stay indoors with family. Some have re-engaged with their education. The lockdown seems to have been favourable for the safety of this cohort. Whether some of this gain can be sustained as restrictions ease is unclear.

7. We are concerned about the increase in exposure of children and young people to potential online abuse.

Key points:

As we emerge from this period we envisage the emotional and mental health fallout for children, young people and their families will be significant. In a recent survey of nearly 1,000 Barnardo's UK practitioners on the impact of Covid-19, 69% said they are supporting someone experiencing an increase in mental health issues due to Covid-19. This included anxiety, stress, sleep dysregulation, depression, reduced self-esteem, OCD behaviours, paranoia and self-harm.

Government should think ahead about the best way of ensuring holistic, agile responses are in place to address this need, which is likely to fall outside the remit of CAMH services and the level of provision that can be made available at school. We believe a keener focus on acknowledging the value of systemic approaches which consider family circumstances, both material and relational, and their impact on children's wellbeing will be required going forward.

Those made vulnerable by poverty and its related insecurity, children with disabilities and those with emotional and behavioural issues are most likely to have been losing ground developmentally and educationally prior to the crisis. Their future outcomes will have been have been disproportionately affected by the crisis. How will this cohort be supported going forward, not only in the immediate 'return' phase but in the longer term? We have an opportunity to re-think how we create more inclusive models of education, which may involve continuing online learning from home, or smaller groups outside the main school, as part of a re-designed learning approach going forward.

The enforced slowing down of family life has reaped some valuable rewards for some families. Relationships have had a chance to deepen and wellbeing has improved. Long and irregular working hours are known to not be conducive to healthy family life. We know there is often value, particularly for some children in low income families, in accessing childcare settings. However we are also learning more about the importance, in terms of children's development, of healthy attachments with primary care givers. The wellbeing of post-pandemic future generations may require a conversation, which isn't primarily driven by the economic imperative, about work, family life and childcare.

Despite the attention and investment Welsh Government has provided to address digital inclusion historically, the pandemic has revealed gaps in access, which will have been impacting on families over time. Just as digital education is poised to be part of the core curriculum in Wales, access to digital in homes, it seems, should be on par with access to key utilities such as energy and water. Addressing digital inequalities requires considerably more attention going forward.