



Supported child contact centres are increasingly seen as the solution to parental contact disputes. Is this appropriate and do they meet the needs of the children involved?

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Michael Durell

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Abstract

Introduction

Arranging child contact post-parental separation and divorce is for many families an ongoing and contentious issue. Many families require external help to make contact happen and supported child contact centres provide that service. Over 4,000 volunteers and staff work in these centres and over 17,000 children use them each year (2009, NACCC). Families use the centres for a variety of reasons, for example, if they were unable to agree contact arrangements. The research will help National Association of Child Contact Centres (NACCC) to examine any change in the families who are now referred, and to review the services provided to its members.

Methodology

The intention of this study is to review the data held by NACCC about supported contact centres and to seek the views of people who work in, or refer to, contact centres and ask them what the pertinent issues facing the centres are. The first stage of the research was to look at the quantitative data held by NACCC and supplied by all the member supported child contact centres in England, Wales and Northern Ireland between 2000 and 2009. The second stage of the research used semi-structured interviews to gather in-depth qualitative data. The final stage of the research was an analysis of the quantitative and qualitative data and to consider implications for practice.

Findings

The demand for supported contact has doubled in the past ten years. Centres have seen more couples who have co-habited, had short term relationships, or never lived together, couples who were in second or third relationships, and younger parents, using supported contact. The research highlights that staff valued their own ability to be neutral very highly and felt that if this

was compromised in any way families would withdraw. There was also evidence that some centres were being pressured to offer support to families who were still in high conflict.

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Introduction

Arranging child contact post-parental separation and divorce is, for many families, an ongoing and contentious issue; “many contact disputes [are] power struggles between parents in which children “are both the ammunition and ... the victims” (Kaganas & Sclater, 2004: 24). Many families require external help to make contact happen and supported child contact centres provide that service. They offer a neutral place where children of separated parents can enjoy contact with their non-resident parents and sometimes other family members, in a comfortable and safe environment. Several families use the centre at the same time and the staff are mostly volunteers offering support and encouragement. Supported centres do not undertake observations, write reports, or attend court. Over 4,000 volunteers and staff work in these centres and over 17,000 children use them each year.

The centres are mostly run as independent organisations/charities. They are registered as members of the National Association of Child Contact Centres (NACCC) who also accredit the centres to ensure they meet the national standards. There are 325 child contact centres and services located throughout England (including the Channel Isles), Wales and Northern Ireland. The research has been undertaken by (NACCC) head office, in conjunction with its members who operate the local contact centres.

Families use the centres for a variety of reasons; usually they are unable to agree contact arrangements. The research will help NACCC to examine any changes in the families who are now referred and to review the services provided to its members.

Aims of the Project

The first voluntary child contact centre opened in 1985 in Nottingham to help meet a need identified by NACCC’s current president Mary Lower, MBE. Mary was a magistrate in the family court and saw a number of non-resident parents who were unable to have contact with their children because there were no suitable venues. The idea was well received by professionals and parents and quickly spread across the country.

Many couples manage the decisions about contact on their own, with little or no external professional support. The number of individuals who use the court system to resolve disputes is estimated by the government to be:

- About 10 per cent of the 150,000 to 200,000 parental couples who separate each year.
- Sixty-seven contact orders were made in England and Wales in 2003 compared with 40,000 in 1993 – the government and legal services acknowledge an increasing number of parents are going to court.

(DCA, DfES & DTI, 2004:1)

The first aim of the research was to look at the families who are currently using supported contact centres to help them manage their contact arrangements, compared with those families who were attending 25 years ago. In particular, NACCC wants to examine whether there has been any change in the type of families referred.

The second aim of the study was to find out whether the supported contact centres feel under pressure from referring agencies and are expected to provide more surveillance of families. There is concern that some agencies, with limited resources for contact, feel under pressure to now refer their more complex contact cases.

It was also originally intended to explore how the centres were meeting the needs of the children and families. However, it was felt this was too ambitious and we did not have sufficient resources within the project.

Context (Literature Review)

There is a substantial body of research concerning parental separation/divorce and its effect on parents and children (Wallerstein and Kelly, 1980; Johnston et al. 1989; Amato and Keith, 1991; Pryor and Rogers, 2001; Smart et al, 2001). Throughout the 1990s and the early part of the 21st Century, researchers have also documented the problems faced by parents, the courts, the legal profession and support services in trying to resolve the issues of contested residency, contact and high conflict cases that result in repeat court appearances (Kaganas & Sclater, 2004; Trinder et al, 2006; Peacey & Hunt, 2009; Hunt & Macleod, 2009). For many families referral to a child contact centre has been seen as a way to ensure contact takes place.

Whilst internationally there has been research evaluating child contact centres (Strategic Partners, 1998; Pearson & Thoennes, 2000; Scottish Executive Legal Studies Research Team, 2004; Ernst & Young, 2005; Sheehan et al, 2005; Alaggia & Brinbaum, 2006), there remains a research gap in this area regarding services in England, Wales and Northern Ireland. There are few sources that refer directly to child contact centres in the UK. There are two papers from the 1990s that describe the emerging service of supported child contact centres. Simpson (1994) gives a personal account of the work of one centre to highlight the strengths they bring to the family justice system and tensions they face if they are to become an established part of the services for separated families. Halliday (1997) describes the role and function of the centres. She says *"just by being there contact centres hope to raise the profile of contact"* (Halliday, 1997: 56).

Kroll (2000) wrote a paper about her examination of the process and practice in a contact centre. The work was undertaken over two years and looked at both supported and supervised child contact. Kroll identifies a number of reasons why families use a contact centre: the parent has no where else to go, there has been a break in contact, or where there has been no previous relationship with the child. Centres are also used in instances where there are concerns about child welfare in relation to a contact parent, mental health, substance misuse, domestic violence, abuse, or abduction. All three papers highlight the neutrality of the venue as a key strength of supported contact centres.

Making arrangements for a child's contact is often the trigger for dispute between the parents and can result in a child having a disrupted relationship with the non-resident parent. In 1999, the Lord Chancellor's Department commissioned research to look at the arrangement for child contact where there were domestic violence issues. While important, it focused solely on issues of domestic violence in the context of child contact. In 2001/02, the same department produced a consultation paper and then a report called *Making Contact Work*. This provided a more detailed examination of child contact and the report did refer to contact centres. The centres were seen as an important development within the family justice system and as *"a useful facility [that] has, however, been seized upon by courts, lawyers and some family court welfare services to accommodate their difficult contact cases."* (The Stationery Office, 2002)

The literature strongly indicates the importance of quality child contact (Amato & Gilbreth, 1999; Dunn, 2004; King & Sobolewski, 2006). Additionally, the potentially detrimental effects on

children of witnessing post-separation parental conflict have been demonstrated (Johnston et al. 1989; Amato & Keith, 1991; Pryor & Rodgers, 2001). However, in the absence of a thorough body of research in this area, many questions remain regarding good practice in contact centres. There is a need to establish the efficacy of procedures in a number of areas. This includes procedures to safeguard children in cases of alleged or actual abuse and domestic violence; procedures to move families on to "normal" contact; the contribution of therapeutic services; and the perceived importance of contact centres to the lives of families.

Over the past 5 years approx 25,000 families were referred to a supported contact centre to help them make arrangements for contact.

Methodology

This research cannot hope to fully address the gap in the research identified in the last section. The intention is to review the data held by NACCC about supported contact centres and to seek the views of people who work in, or refer to, contact centres and ask what their views on the pertinent issues facing the centres are. This study has been undertaken on behalf of NACCC and its members and is directly focused on the provision of supported child contact.

The first stage of the research was to access the quantitative data held by NACCC and supplied by all the member supported child contact centres in England, Wales and Northern Ireland between 2000 and 2009. The figures used in the tables below are drawn from the annual returns. There are gaps in each year's data due to not all centres completing the annual returns.

The centres are asked to provide an annual statistical return giving a wide range of information about the centre, the families, the referrals, and funding. From this data it has been possible to look at referral rates, referrers, take up by families, waiting lists, inappropriate referrals and the number of contact sessions. Part of the research time was spent interrogating this data, and looking at the trends for supported contact over the past decade. Also at this stage the research drew on internal documents, reports, articles from the in-house magazine, and a recent survey conducted by a member of staff concerning inappropriate referrals.

The second stage of the research used semi-structured interviews to gather in-depth qualitative data. The research sample of people to be interviewed was drawn from a cross section of staff at NACCC headquarters, paid staff and volunteers from three supported centres and referrers. Within the sample there were three people from the NACCC office who have contact with the supported centres and offer advice and guidance on managing referrals. There were also three senior members of management team. There were five centre co-ordinators who were responsible for responding to referrals and supporting staff and volunteers. There were three long term volunteers. There were five professionals who make referrals to centres, these included solicitors, Cafcass officers and social workers.

Semi-structured interviews were used to help focus the points for discussion whilst allowing interviewees the opportunity to express their views and thinking. The interviews consisted of between 8 and 10 questions. The questions were designed to get interviewees to talk about their understanding of supported contact, to describe the families who use supported contact and if they felt any changes had taken place. Interviewees were also asked about the referral processes and how much information was shared with the centre; if they thought families with more complex problems were being referred; if centres were under pressure to accept a referral regardless of the family background; and finally, about their vision for the future of supported contact centres.

The original methodology was revised. It was intended that questionnaires would be sent out to parents who attended three supported contact centres, but due to time constraints, staff capacity to administer and analyse the returns and staff illness, it was not possible to complete this aspect of the research. However, some of the centre co-ordinators did share some case study material including feedback and comments from parents.

The research process did not include any direct interviews with parents or children. All of the data accessed from NACCC was anonymised. Before conducting the semi-structured interviews interviewees were provided with information about the research and were asked for their consent as well as told the interviews would be confidential. Any case study information that was shared was anonymised and no families were identified.

Findings

The Families

The interviewees all stated that they felt the families referred to centres reflected the changing nature of families over the past few decades within society. They were seeing more couples using supported contact who had co-habited, had short term relationships, or had never lived together, couples who were in second or third relationships and younger parents. Some said there were grandparents, aunts and uncles, siblings and step-siblings being referred.

Table 1 (below) shows a 57 per cent increase in the number of contact sessions being offered to families over the past decade. Between 2003 and 2009 there has been a 49.3 per cent increase in the number of children seeing a non-resident parent in a contact centre. Over the past five years there has been a 31.5 per cent increase in the number of families using a contact centre.

Table 1. Number of contact sessions & users (2000 – 2009)

Date	No. of Contact Sessions	No. of Children	No. of Families
2000-01	5240	Not Recorded	Not Recorded
2001-02	8565	Not Recorded	Not Recorded
2002-03	7327	Not Recorded	Not Recorded
2003-04	7671	4311	Not Recorded
2004-05	7050	4605	4385
2005-06	6117	4759	3710
2006-07	6636	4897	4064
2007-08	8259	7235	6923
2008-09	8252	6438	5767

Source: NACCC Annual Statistical Returns

Families being referred to supported contact have a range of problems that affect their ability to manage contact without the involvement of an external agency. The interviewees agreed the reasons for a family to be referred to a centre have remained consistent with those set out by Kroll (2000). All the centres interviewed said they used the NACCC referral form and had more information about the families' backgrounds and possible risks. Some reported a rise in families

from a range of ethnic backgrounds. Also there were more reported concerns about substance misuse. All the interviewees reported a rise in the number of women who were presenting as the contact parent. Many centres said it was as high as quarter of all referrals. In most cases the women had issues about substance misuse and/or mental illness.

Most interviewees saw the centres as providing a stage in the journey many families had to travel, from no contact and high levels of hostility to making independent arrangements for contact. The supported centres are felt to be a significant point for many families when they are faced with the reality of contact taking place on a regular date, time and at a particular venue. For many, the centre was seen as somewhere for parents to show commitment and consistency and on both sides to build trust.

Referrals

The demand for supported contact has continued to increase every year, and in the past ten years the number of referrals has almost doubled. There has also been an increase in the number of supported contact centres – from 40 in 1993 to 200 in 1996 to 280 by 2009. There were approximately 300 in the middle of the decade. However, centres have closed due to various problems including; funding, recruiting co-ordinators and volunteers, and pressure from referrers to take more complex cases. NACCC has been instrumental in providing support to help prevent centres closing. However, in some areas centres have had to introduce waiting lists.

Table 2 (below) shows the break down of referrals by agencies over the past ten years. Solicitors continue to be the main source of referrals to supported contact centres. They refer approximately three-quarters of all the families who use centres each year. It is, therefore, apparent that the relationship between a local centre and a family’s lawyer is crucial to success for a positive outcome for a child’s contact.

Table 2. Percentage of Referrals by Agencies (2000 – 2009)

Date	No. of responding centres	Cafcass	Mediation	Children’s services	Solicitors	Self Referrals	Other
2000-01	155	22%	1%	3.5%	71%	Not Recorded	2.5%

2001-02	177	19.9%	1.4%	5%	71%	Not Recorded	2.7%
2002-03	153	14.8%	1%	3.7%	75.6%	3%	1.9%
2003-04	162	9.4%	1.4%	4.6%	80.6%	3.1%	0.9%
2004-05	179	14.1%	0.6%	4.2%	78%	2.7%	0.4%
2005-06	171	11.4%	1%	4.4%	78.4%	3.4%	1.4%
2006-07	157	10.3%	0.5%	5.3%	80.3%	2.7%	0.6%
2007-08	218	13.2%	0.8%	6%	76.1%	3.1%	0.7%
2008-09	211	8.9%	1.8%	4.5%	76.4%	3%	5.4%

Source: NACCC Annual Statistical Returns

Child and Family Court Advisory Support Service (Cafcass) has always been closely linked with contact centres. However, the figures indicate that Cafcass referrals have dropped by approximately 50 per cent since 2000. From the research data it is not possible to say why this has occurred. Cafcass works with the most conflicted families and over the past ten years have seen a rise in the number of families making application to the courts. From the data held by NACCC it is not possible to determine how many of the cases referred by any agency are court ordered. Referrals from other agencies have remained consistently low. Some interviewees said they had links with both mediation and children’s services.

The centre co-ordinators reinforced the finding that solicitors made the highest number of referrals and the relationship between the centre and the local family court and lawyers was very important. They all said they worked hard to ensure courts and solicitors understood the role of supported contact. The co-ordinators said if they had any concerns about referrals they could speak to the solicitors and did not feel under pressure. However, this is not a view shared by all centres. From the survey undertaken in 2008 about inappropriate referrals it was found some centres were “...working with families where significant risks have been identified...” (NACCC, 2008). A recent NACCC report has identified cases where centres have been pressured by solicitors to produce reports and attend court.

From the interviews conducted with referrers they were asked what their expectations of a supported centre were. They all expressed a clear understanding that supported centres did not supervise contact and the staff/volunteers would not write reports or give evidence in court, unless there was a clear safeguarding issue. However, they were aware of situations where centres had been put under pressure to produce reports, or courts had ordered staff to attend court. One solicitor said that when attending court in a neighbouring area, the judges and fellow solicitors did expect the centre to undertake observations and report back to the court.

The centre - venue and neutrality

The centres are managed and delivered by a variety of different organisations. Some form part of a larger charity, and others operate from local church or community centres. Some have full time paid staff and offer a range of services to separating couples through the week. Other supported centres only open for a few hours once a week and are staffed by volunteers. One of the key aspects of all supported contact is the venue and environment that is offered to parents and children. In all of the literature concerning supported centres the authors talk about centres being neutral or offering a neutral venue. When analysing the interviews all the interviewees used the word, neutral, in relation to the services offered by centres. The referrers said this was the most important feature of a contact centre. This was usually followed by the words, safe, secure, warm, and friendly, and these were used to describe the environment and staff.

From the interviews it was apparent staff valued their ability to be neutral and felt that if this was compromised in any way families would withdraw. The voluntary nature of the service was also felt to be important. Some said families often assumed initially centres were run by social workers and the courts. Once they understood the staff were volunteers and would not be reporting back to courts, the parents relaxed and were more accepting of the centre. All of the interviewees expressed clearly that while the centres had been embraced by the statutory and legal system as a valuable resource, the centres were independent. The centres were flexible and could be responsive to local need. The provision of independence and neutrality were no less tangible than the provision of supervision and reporting on contact.

Supported contact as a resolution

The interviewees held mixed views about whether supported centres were a long-term resolution for some families' contact disputes. It was felt NACCC had now provided guidance to centres to help them define their role in supporting families. Centres are advised to review all cases and to look at moving families out of the centre to more independent forms of contact in a timely way. The centre co-ordinators all said they had had some families who had used the centre for long term contact, in some cases for a number of years. They all emphasised that these cases were the exception but that there was a need for this service.

The interviewees felt centres were being asked to take on families with more complex problems. From the inappropriate survey data (NACCC, 2008) and from some of the comments made by staff, there is a sense that some centres are being pressured to offer support to families who are still in high conflict and could be a physical or emotional risk to the child. This is an area that requires more in-depth study.

Implications for practice

The research has produced a wealth of material for NACCC to consider in relation to supported contact. The board of trustees will consider which issues it wants to take forward in terms of possible further in-depth study. There are three major areas that will be shared with members via the web site, the in house magazine, and the annual conference in October 2010.

The Families

Supported contact centres are used increasingly by families to help develop and move forward with their child contact arrangements. The changing pattern of family life is reflected in the structure of the families who are referred to centres. NACCC has increasingly developed the services it provides for its members and has produced national standards – these have recently been reviewed and revised. The research has identified various changes to the family demographic within centres. The increasing number of women who are the non-resident parent is an area that requires further investigation to ensure centres are aware of this trend and have services to meet the need. NACCC is currently in the process of developing a communication

strategy and working closely with the judiciary, Cafcass and the government to update existing protocols and to promote accredited contact services for families further.

Referral information

It is important to understand the reasons families are referred to a centre. An in-depth examination of the referral data would reveal more about whether supported contact is seen as a means of early diversion to keep families out of the legal process, or a means to move conflicted and hostile families who are entrenched in the court process to a practical solution. The major source of referrals to supported contact centres is from solicitors. The demand for supported contact has continued to increase and it is important NACCC and its members understand the reasons and implications. What is unclear from the data is how many of the solicitor referrals are early interventions to divert families from the court process and how many are part of a court order.

The interviews have highlighted the importance of the relationship between the centre and the referrer to ensure the families who will benefit have access to the service. There are instances where this relationship has been ignored and the referrer has put pressure on the centre to undertake tasks not consistent with supported contact. A more detailed study of referrals would provide a better understanding of how supported centres contribute to reducing the number of contentious and conflicted families reaching or returning to the court system.

NACCC are also aware of more parents who are acting as litigants in person in court. This has produced more self referrals, and centres have identified the information shared is not always accurate and is difficult to verify.

Neutrality – a valued asset

One of the greatest assets of supported contact is seen to be the offer of neutrality in its venue, staff and service to families. . The word has leapt out of all the literature, guidance material and from all the interviews. It is time to look at how neutrality is maintained and what it means for referring agencies, families, and staff/volunteers. For some centres it is apparent their neutrality has been compromised by external agencies demanding they judge one party over the other.

Conclusion

The research found the families who use supported contact now, compared with 25 years ago, still have many of the same issues affecting their ability to arrange contact. The interview data reveals the way that families structure their relationships have changed over the years. The relationships are more short-term and less formal, and this can present some complex issues when parents separate that can be very difficult to untangle. The centres, with the support of NACCC, have developed their processes and procedures for collecting data and managing referrals. They are now more aware of the issues affecting families and this will be an area for further study.

Contact centres offer a very practical solution for parents who are struggling to find a way forward that allows the children to continue their relationship with both parents, but does not force the parents to continue a relationship they no longer value.

Support child contact centres have become embedded in the framework of private family law, providing a valued resource for families and agencies. From the literature, the judiciary and legal profession saw the potential very early on and have increased the demand they make on the service. For many centres this relationship has been one of mutual respect with many lawyers and judges giving up time to sit on management committees and protect the centre from misuse, however, for some it has been the reverse, and centres have been seen as weapon in the adversarial battle carried out by both parties to score points.

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