The Role of the Independent Visitor

Catherine Pestano & Ashleigh Searle

Care can be traumatic for many

When a child or young person comes into care, they experience a great deal of loss and trauma, even if they are placed in a safer environment. Sometimes, placements can't meet the young person's needs and, the child or young person may have to move a number of times before finding a suitable foster carer who can give them the security and comfort that they need.

Multiple losses & changes

The adults in their life may be many and changing, affecting how they trust new adults.

At other times either the placement itself or the environment surrounding the placement may pose additional risks to the young person therefore, additional safeguard measures can be helpful to any child or young person.

This is provided for through legislation in the form of the independent visitor (IV), a role that sits outside the social work lines of management and, in line with the national IV standards (2016), can be truly independent.

A Forgotten opportunity?

- An Independent Visitor is an Adult long term volunteer who connects with a child or young person who is Looked After.
- It is a right within the law (E&W).
- Less than 3% of eligible children and young people have one
- Anyone can support getting access

Something that continues…..

- At times like this, an unconnected adult friend may be just what a young person needs, and this is available in the guise of an independent visitor (IV).
- I have been an IV for two unaccompanied young asylum seekers, and subsequently worked as part of a team co-ordinating a large urban IV service, training and supporting adult volunteers to befriend and safeguard looked-after children and young people.

Voice of experience....

- I went into care at 15. In the three years that I was looked after, I had around 14 different placements. I have moved so many times that I am sure I've forgotten a few in amongst the list that I remember. I can, however, remember clearly how I felt in my first placement, the feeling of being a guest in a house that isn't yours, surrounded by a family that isn't yours and things that are not yours. Unconsciously, this shaped the way in which I built my relationships throughout my time in care, keeping people at a comfortable distance reserved for acquaintances and distant relatives.

What is the role of an IV?

- The role was created to both safeguard and support children and young people at a vulnerable time in their lives.
- An adult outside the system would be an independent support and ear for a young person.
- It needs to be a serious commitment for the volunteer

Practical terms

- Following a training course and vetting, volunteers commit to meeting with the young person two to three hours per fortnight for a minimum of a year, and help them to take part in activities of their choosing.
- Many relationships will last longer than that and into adulthood, while others come to a natural end. There is a small budget to cover costs, travel, activity, snacks.
- It may be every 2 to 4 weeks , led by the young person's need
- Hard to prescribe for relationships…..

The legal bits

The Children Act 1989 sets out the legal framework for the appointment, role and function of IVs for looked-after children. Originally, the need for an IV was identified in Section 17 of Schedule 2 of the Children Act 1989 for when communication between a child and their parent, or a person who is not a parent but has parental responsibility, has been infrequent. Or if a child has not had contact with parents or by someone with parental responsibility during the preceding 12 months. This was later repealed by Section 16(2) Children and Young Persons Act 2008 (CYPA 2008).

The appointment of an IV to a child is now made under Section 23ZB of the Children Act 1989 either for the above regulatory reasons or "in any other case, it appears to the local authority that it would be in the best interests of the child"

Municipalities differences

- The right to an IV is mandatory across England and Wales where a local authority must make provision, either in house or through external commissioning on a spot or block basis. This is not the case in Scotland and Northern Ireland where legislation differs and similar provision is patchier. The most recent national audit shows a mix of in-house and external provision.

Optional for the child

- Once a child or young person understands that this adult is giving up their free time and is not paid to be there for them, this altruism can, in itself, be world changing.
- Unusually, it is an optional service, which gives the child a choice about whether to accept. Sometimes there is too much going on for them, and therefore it is worth raising it again later if that is the case.
- The Children's Rights Director for England noted that children said that the main quality of a good IV was being a great listener

Open to all

There are particular categories of young people deemed especially in need of an IV, but any looked-after child aged 0-18 can be offered one if it is deemed in their best interests.

It takes longer to create and support relationships with the most vulnerable children and young people

Impact

- The role is about building a trusting relationship with one child, with consistency, reliability and care being the key components. While legislation states that the adult will befriend and advise, more emphasis is placed on building a caring interested relationship than on direct advice giving.
- Toner et al (2010) note that as the relationships with IVs are often longer-lasting than with their social workers, children and young people reported being more likely to listen to guidance from their IV.

Measuring Impact

- The enemy of many services is the basic way this is attempted. KPIs tend to divert focus and energy and inadvertently shape services
- The collaborative learning partnerships promoted by Human Learning Systems offer a different path to real learning about what may work for children, in a way that standard quants do not.

National IV Network – Barnardo's

- To find out more about your area contact the national IV Network co-ordinated by Barnardo's visit https://ivnetwork.org.uk/
- For a copy of this full presentation including references and further resources please email catherine.pestano@open.ac.uk
- Human Learning Systems https://www.humanlearning.systems/

Questions & thoughts?

- What is there for you?
- Who do you work with right now who may need an IV?
- What is the first step you could take to improving things in your institution?
- How might you change the way you think about commissioning?
- How can you champion improving access locally, whatever your role?

References

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Thank you. Please remember this message.

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