

Promoting standardised case management

As a single parent from a small country town, Mary-Jo has retrained and now proudly works in child welfare. Mary-Jo is committed to helping the young mothers she works with increase their confidence and learn skills around raising their children. But what questions are most important, how long should she leave that child with her mother when the child doesn't seem to be OK? How much time should she spend when she has so many cases and so many forms to be filled in to keep the funding coming?

Standardised case management ensures that social workers make decisions on time, with the best possible information - including what the child or young person thinks (Cheers, Fernandez et al. 2011). For experienced social workers, standardised case management provides a checklist to review the quality of work.

For the less experienced, case management can guide practice and ensure that all the significant areas of a child's life are explored with a deep understanding. For agencies, case management provides the data to assist with supervision of staff and to generate knowledge which can improve child welfare services.

Case management is now electronic, giving social workers more face-to-face time with children and families. They don't have to waste time filling in multiple forms or trying to find information in disorganised files (Cheers and Morwitzer 2006). Importantly, electronic case management is the most accurate way to provide quality data to governments - and for internal management - because of the wide variety of data recorded.

Background

The original case management system, now used by welfare agencies in NSW, was developed by a team of social work professors from the United Kingdom. The idea of standardised, evidence-informed guidance to workers was immediately picked up by Australian (non-government) services and local universities, who saw that case management systems could potentially help children in Australia. The *Looking After Children* (LAC) system began being used for children in out-

of-home care by Barnardos Australia in 1997; other NSW agencies and governments in the Australian Capital Territory and Victoria soon followed. Barnardos Australia then joined with the University of New South Wales to trial the United Kingdom Assessment Framework for children still living in their own homes. This Australian adaptation, known as *Supporting Children and Responding to Families* (SCARF), was implemented in 2004. These paper-based systems were replaced by LAC electronic system (LACES) in 2000 and e-SCARF in 2007.

Case management systems have sometimes been met with resistance by commentators concerned about perceived threats to professionalisation. This was particularly so in the United Kingdom, when reforms coincided with increased Government reorganisation of social work services (Knight and Caveney 1998; Garrett 1999; Munro 2004).

In Australia, case management has largely been adopted voluntarily (Cheers, Fernandez et al. 2011). Each system has been improved over the past decades through tapping the knowledge and daily experience of workers. Barnardos has made each improved version of the systems available to other children's welfare agencies. Barnardos has also supplied technical support and training, and Aboriginal agencies receive the systems for free. Our goal has been to help raise the quality of services to Australian children.

By 2011, LACES and e-SCARF needed updating and integrating to reflect new developments in welfare practice and ways to capture data. LACES and e-SCARF are to be replaced by one integrated system, called *MyStory*. Integration will allow

children to move from home to care, and vice versa, without the need to record the information more than once. MyStory will be a secure electronic system. Services will be located 'in the cloud' so that small welfare agencies can most effectively get all the help they need wherever they are. The new system will meet social workers' developing requirements for:

- Cultural care planning – particularly ensuring Aboriginal children are better understood
- Kinship care - the fastest growing form of care
- Tracking complex relationships
- After-care (essential to having a young person reach successful independence)
- The active participation of children, young people and their families in their care plan.

Using evidence

Standardised case management is based on clear professional knowledge and established 'best practice' standards. The Australian child welfare workforce comes from a range of universities, TAFEs and life experiences. Regardless of their academic background, individual workers have rarely been formally educated on all the aspects of children's care that they will need, such as child development, education and health problems, and research on the impact of out-of-home care. Standardised case management draws on international and local evidence of what can assist children who live in foster or residential 'homes', or their families when they are having real problems being able to care for them (Cheers 2002; Fernandez and Romeo 2003).

Addressing planning and assessment

Case management focuses on two important areas. Firstly, it ensures that decisions do not drift and that planning is active and ongoing. Secondly, it calls for detailed assessment of a child's life.

Prior to standardised case management, many children became 'lost' in the care system (ACWA 1986). Decisions were allowed to drift along with little regard to how the child felt. For example, case workers often changed and never got to know

the child or find out what was happening in their lives (Gilbertson and Barber 2004). Standardised case management ensures everyone knows what decisions need to be made and when.

Children were frequently disadvantaged because not enough time or effort was spent on exploring all the important aspects of their lives (Gilbertson and Barber 2004). Workers did not find out what was happening at school or to children's health, or whether they were making connections to their cultural community (especially important for Aboriginal children). Workers frequently failed to address the long-term problems of the child or young person, such as 'life making' issues, for example, making friends or learning how to look after themselves and become independent. Standardised case management outlines what is important to know and what is 'normal' for the child's age.

Providing a voice for service users

Standardised case management offers regular and well-timed opportunities for children and young people, their carers and parents to be transparent and open. Participation of all parties is required by each State and Territory's law, international conventions and professional standards - but it rarely happens.

Case management systems require the child, and adults important to the child, to say what they think, and prompt workers to be sure that these views are carefully considered. By taking advantage of new communication technologies, the MyStory system will find new ways to communicate with children, brothers, sisters, parents and foster carers, to ensure their views become known.

Supplying accurate data

Standardised case management systems can provide data which can be used to improve the welfare of children (Cheers, Fernandez et al. 2011). Practice-based data is invaluable for:

- Workers – to keep caseload planning on track
- Managers - to monitor care planning and supervision of workers by checking caseloads and compliance with decision-making schedules

- Administrators – to streamline functions like accurate carer payments
- Agencies - to demonstrate the quality of services and maintain accountability to governments and donors.
- Researchers – access to standardised administrative data contributes to understanding the best ways of helping children and young people.

In sum

Standardised case management can assist workers achieve 'best practice' and save time and resources by providing easily accessible data.

Children, young people and families who have used case management systems advise that is a consistent and quality service (Tregeagle 2010). Service users also associate case-managed systems with assisting them to participate in decision-making (Tregeagle and Mason 2008). MyStory will extend opportunities for service user participation.

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Reading and Resources

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