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## Parents' capacity to change and overcome adversity

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# PARENTS' CAPACITY TO CHANGE AND OVERCOME ADVERSITY

# Objective

- Draw on data from a prospective longitudinal study of infants suffering, or likely to suffer, significant harm to explore defining characteristics of parents who were able to overcome considerable adversity

# Prospective longitudinal study of infants suffering, or likely to suffer, significant harm

- Sample initially comprised 57 babies identified as suffering or likely to suffer significant harm before 1<sup>st</sup> birthday
- 43 followed until age three; 37 until age five; 36 until age 8
- Data from case papers; annual interviews with birth parents/carers, social workers and teachers; Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaires
- Age 8 follow-up - Interviews with the children; data from National Pupil Database
- Extensive efforts made to maintain sample

# Sample bias

- Findings should be approached with caution
- Composition of sample skewed by two underlying sets of circumstances:
  - Cohort children more likely to suffer significant harm
  - Attrition affected certain groups more than others (adopted children; parents opt in and out of study depending on personal circumstances)
  - Kinship carers and parents who have overcome substantial difficulties remained static.

# Parents' difficulties

- Violence (at home and in community), substance misuse issues, mental ill health, learning disabilities, experiences of abuse in childhood
- Housing problems including homelessness, financial problems including bankruptcy, poverty, violent neighbourhoods
- Isolation, poor relationships with extended family
- Twenty mothers and an unknown number of fathers had already been permanently separated from at least one older child

# Children

- Majority from families already known to children's social care through involvement with older siblings
- 65% identified before birth; almost all before they were six months old
- 63% were boys
- 69% White British; 31% from BME groups: 69% of these were of mixed heritage
- 14% were identified as having disabilities or special health care needs

# The Children: at around the time they were born

- Severe risk (12:28%): Risk factors, no protective factors and **no capacity for change**
- High risk (7:16%): Risk factors, protective factors and **no capacity for change**
- Medium risk (21:49%): Risk factors, protective factors, **capacity for change**
- Low risk (3:7%): No risk factors (or previous risk factors addressed), protective factors and **capacity for change**

# The Children: at age three years

- By age three the children who were traced (n=43) could be classified into three groups of roughly similar size:
  - Children living at home with birth parents who had succeeded in sustaining positive change (16:37%)
  - Children living at home with parents who had been unable to sustain positive change (12:28%)
  - Children permanently separated from parents (15: 35%)

# At age five

- 12 (35%) children remained with birth parents who made and sustained substantial changes to adverse behaviour patterns
- 6 (16%) children were safeguarded at age three, but no longer at age five – capacity to change not maintained.
- 8 (22%) children remained severe, high or medium risk of being exposed to maltreatment with birth parents who were unable to change
- No new permanence decisions between three and five: eight new separations at age six and seven – all initial severe risk children now separated

# Defining characteristics of parents who changed

- Able to come to terms with the removal of older children
- Able to acknowledge to risks posed by destructive behaviour patterns
- Able not simply to engage with services but also make positive use out of the support they offered
- Able to develop supportive informal networks
- Able to develop supportive relationships with at least one professional who parents' considered to have gone the 'extra mile'

# Fragile families

- Where parents have sustained change to date:  
no longer concerns relating to maltreatment
- However living with immense stress relating to:
  - Poverty, violent neighbourhoods, mobility, debt
  - Housing
  - Physical and mental illness
  - Contact
  - Children's emotional and behavioural difficulties

# Conclusion

- The proportion of parents who have successfully changed decreased over time
- Policies designed to reduce child poverty and inequality, to strengthen communities and to maintain and improve access to services are particularly important because they can improve the context of parenting for families such as these.

# Thank you!

- Happy to answer questions
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