

“You’re in my heart while we’re apart”: reflections on working with parents of children in care

by Jacinta Swann

Introduction

This article is based on a workshop delivered at the 2021 IFCA conference, entitled *Minding the moments with parents*. The workshop explored opportunities to promote relationships with parents of children in care, for the wellbeing of their children. Preparing for the conference gave me an opportunity to reflect on my experiences of working with parents of children in care. This was achieved via the various lenses of my professional career: as a child protection and children in care social worker; a team leader; and a principal social worker managing a service which includes a family support service, an aftercare service for young people leaving care, and an advocacy service for parents of children in care. Through these lenses, I have witnessed and experienced working with parents from the time they are struggling to care for their children, through the care journey. I have also seen how children and young people navigate being in care, transitioning into adulthood and out of care, and the important part their parents have played in their lives throughout that journey. This article explores reflections and learnings drawn from these experiences over the past 30 years.

“*At the point of parents’ greatest vulnerability at the loss of their children, when they are often in shock, grieving and overwhelmed, social work support is reduced for them, and focused more on the child in care, foster carers and review systems.*”

Who are the parents of children in care?

In 2020 there were 5,882 children in care. 65 per cent of these children were in general foster care, 26 per cent were in relative foster care, 7 per cent were in residential care and 2 per cent in other placements (Tusla, 2021). Therefore, we can say that there are thousands of parents who are, or have been, involved in the lives of children in care. Within the care system, children in care are facilitated and encouraged to develop and

maintain relationships with their families (DOHC, 2003; HSE, 2011; Tusla, 2017). Young people have also stressed the importance of having access to family (McEvoy and Smith, 2011).

Research indicates that the outcomes for children in care are enhanced when parents, foster carers and social work services have good working relationships (Aldgate and Stratham, 2001). Yet, parents of children in care can feel silenced and powerless in care proceedings and in relation to their contact with their child in foster care (HSE, 2010; O'Mahony et al, 2016; Lynch and Hynan, 2019). Parents often experience a sense of powerlessness, a lack of information and lack of participation in the placement process (HSE, 2010; Egelund and Hestbæk, 2003 in Slettebø, 2013). This sense of powerlessness can lead to frustration and anger which in turn can create challenges in achieving meaningful contact with their children (O'Brien et al, 2015). The chaos and distress of the parent's life before their child goes into care often continues afterwards, sometimes resulting in non-attendance at meetings or family visits. Parents can at times avoid the pain they may have caused their children (Holtan and Eriksen 2006 in Slettebø, 2013) while having little or no support to face this pain, support which could help them to repair their relationship with their child.

Neglect is the primary reason for children being taken into care (Tusla, 2021). This is often not intentional neglect. Major contributing factors can be the parents' addiction, mental health issues, intellectual disability, domestic violence, and their own experiences of being parented (Baldwin et al, 2015; O'Malley and Devaney, 2016). Very often it's a combination of all these factors. In the main, parents of children in care are mothers, often parenting alone, and living in financial poverty (Broadhurst et al, 2015; Broadhurst and Mason, 2020; O'Malley, 2020).

Many parents of children in care experience barriers to understanding and engaging in the Child in Care system due to low levels of education, learning difficulties, addiction and mental ill health. Parents can feel powerless in determining their own futures (Lynch and Hynan, 2019). Mothers can be haunted by the stigma of being a mother living apart from her children (Morriss, 2018) and experience loneliness and isolation, which impacts negatively on their mental health and their relationships (Moran, McGregor and Devaney, 2017).

Parents can suffer emotional reactions and contradictory feelings arising from the

experience of the loss of their child (Schofield et al, 2011). This loss can express itself in anger and denial. Advocacy staff, foster carers and social workers can find these responses difficult to manage and engage with in any meaningful way. This may be particularly the case for foster carers, who are balancing this with managing the child's distress as well.

At the point of parents' greatest vulnerability at the loss of their children, when they are often in shock, grieving and overwhelmed, social work support is reduced for them, and focused more on the child in care, foster carers and review systems. This change often compounds the distress and isolation felt by many of the parents who have little or no support to navigate the care system. The Clarecare Advocacy Service for Parents of Children in Care, funded by Tusla–Child and Family Agency, evolved through parents asking who was there for them now when they needed someone the most, at the loss of their child.

Reflecting on working with parents of children in care

I have been involved in the development and management of the Clarecare Advocacy Service for Parents of Children in Care for over 20 years. Parents speak to us about what it is like losing their child, returning home to an empty house, often alone, and sitting in an overwhelming silence. They speak about feelings of shame about their child being in care. They feel that they are seen by their community as 'bad people'. Some parents feel that they have failed their child and often feel guilty about that. Parents have expressed relief that their child is cared for when they know they cannot care for them themselves, and they often delight in seeing their child achieve educationally while in foster care.

Each time in preparing a parent for Child in Care review meetings, you can almost see them reliving the losing of their child and having to face this publicly, again. But they go to the meetings, managing these complex feelings of fear, shame and sometimes anger, in the hope of increasing access, to let their child know they care, and, for many, in the hope that their child will eventually come home. The hope of connection with their child sustains their resilience to face their loss again at public meetings.

It can be difficult for all staff working with parents, children, and foster carers to stay with the parent as they attempt to manage what is happening for them. Parents can evoke complex feelings of anger, frustration and sadness in those who have responsibility for

the child who has been placed in the care system. For those working in the care system, there is a need to acknowledge and explore ambivalent feelings as an integral part of building a working relationship with parents, for the wellbeing of their children (Slettebø, 2013). As professionals working with parents of children in care, it is vital to reflect on, and make sense of, the way we feel about parents whose children have been removed from their care. This important process provides clarity about the reasons parental participation must be supported, if we are to promote genuine and meaningful engagement.

The first step we take in the Clarecare Advocacy Service is to see a parent of a child in care as a person, a person who feels and makes mistakes and who is much more than the case record of what they did or did not do to/for their child. In reality, this can be challenging, particularly when you hear the child's story. But it can be done, and it does matter. Supporting parents to be the best parent they can be can ultimately have a positive impact on their children. This support can facilitate quality family visits and give children and young people in care an opportunity to make sense of their world.

In Clarecare, our experience of working with young people in aftercare reinforces the value of this approach, as we see young people navigate questions about their history. Even young people who have ambivalent feelings about their parents are still often concerned about their wellbeing. In later teenage years young people often seek to understand why they came into care, and can seek to return to their parent(s) to see if it could work. This can sometimes lead to care placement breakdowns as they navigate relationships in their world. There have been positive outcomes for young people when parents and foster parents have worked well together, where the parent was accepted as part of the child's life.

As a social work team leader doing Child in Care reviews, I always struggled with how much contact between a child and their parent was needed, and how to balance everyone's needs. Decisions in reviews are made based on available information on the day, individual situations and available resources. Small things can tip the balance in decision making as we all try to manage the group dynamics, while trying to keep the child's needs to the fore. Parents of children in care feel the emotional impact of small things said in reviews or during family visits and I have observed how this impacts on them and on their behaviours. Therefore, the importance of being mindful of our

language and reactions and how this can promote the parent’s engagement or disengagement with the care process and ultimately with their child, cannot be overstated.

Personal experience has for me also emphasised the importance of minding the moments between parents and children in care. A number of years ago, I was in a bad car crash which meant I was away from home in rehab for a number of months. It was a six-hour round trip to bring my children to see me each weekend. I was so excited to see them as I missed them so much, and they felt the same. However, those visits were never really what we imagined in our excitement. My daughters wanted the mammy they had before the accident, the one who gave big hugs and minded them, who cooked and laughed with them and just did what they needed. And I wanted to be that mammy too. During those weekends, we sometimes argued and were annoyed at small things while not knowing why. We often ended up crying together when it just was not working. We could not go back to what it was – we had all changed. We were having daily experiences we could not share with one another and the little stories and details of our lives were being missed.

This experience made me reflect extensively on family visits and how parents and children cope with things being different, and with their changing roles. I found a new understanding of the ways families have to adjust and find new ways to be with each other. Tears and distress can be expressions of how much parents and children love and miss one another, yet don’t know what to do with all their feelings. I was also made more aware of the effort that’s required of the person who gets the child to family visits, what it means for them that it goes well and what they have to manage on the way home when it does not.

Those of us working within the care system need to acknowledge that how we understand and manage moments in each part of the care process impacts on the child’s and parent’s transitions. We need to mind these moments for the wellbeing of the children we seek to support and to consider how relationships between children and their parents can be strengthened and nurtured. Each part of the system that supports the child: foster carers, social workers, parents and the children themselves, needs support to navigate this complex process.

“*Today, due to the demands on the care system, much of the time and energy for family visits goes into physically organising and getting to access without looking at what happens in the room.*”

Working together for children in care

Today, due to the demands on the care system, much of the time and energy for family visits goes into physically organising and getting to access without looking at what happens in the room. Consequently, becoming clear about what we are trying to achieve in family visits can be a key question that gets lost in the organising. At a very basic level, we need to start acknowledging that this is not a normal situation and that it needs a shared approach to make the family visit as positive an experience as possible.

Those supporting children in care are often struggling to navigate a complex situation, and often without adequate resources. This has become particularly difficult of late, due to the high rate of staff turnover in social work. One parent we work with has had eight social workers in two years, and had not met social worker number seven before number eight arrived. However, we have also seen opportunities whereby in working together we have improved the relationships between children and their parents.

The Covid-19 pandemic has provided an opportunity to experience, as a wider society, what it is like not to see those we love, and not to hold them or to touch them. It gave us a window into the everyday world of a parent of a child in care. Trojan efforts were made by foster carers and social workers to keep the connections alive between parents and their children in new and creative ways, particularly using technology. Parents struggled, like many of us on WhatsApp calls, to know what to say after “hello”. When we consulted with social workers and foster carers, they acknowledged that they too were struggling with the practicalities of the technology, in managing the calls and supporting the child. All parts of the care system were struggling and needed something to support positive communication between children and their parents online. In acknowledging the struggle across the system, a creative solution emerged, benefiting all parts of the system supporting the child in care. We reviewed with parents what helped and what the learnings were. Based on consultations with parents, social workers and foster carers, an information booklet with practical tips was created that could be used by all parts of the system in response to the struggle of navigating this

new way of connecting (Clarecare, 2021). This booklet is available to download at: www.clarecare.ie/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/Technology_Access_Booklet_low_res.pdf

We also learned, through the research and the development of this resource, that no one has all the answers on how to manage the peculiarities of family contact and communication. Whether virtually or in person, it's still, and will probably always be, a work in progress.

Conclusion

Over the years, I have seen the value of parental participation for the wellbeing of children in care. Parents have a unique contribution to make to their children's lives. Without their contribution there is a piece missing in the jigsaw of the child's life. Foster carers and social workers who support children in care play a part in supporting the meaningful contribution of parents. This means acknowledging that parents, in most cases, also want what is best for their children. It starts by seeing the parent in their struggle and acknowledging our own struggles as professionals working in this grey and complex area. Progress can be slow and it takes time, but central to all interactions is basic respect and an awareness of how our words and actions may impact others, in some instances, for many years to come.

Over all the years of direct work with parents, I am often in awe of their resilience in the face of adversity, in facing people and systems where they are often either not acknowledged at all, or alternatively, where they are viewed as troublesome. These parents face this for their children, whom they are unable to care for, in order to attempt to repair the trust that has been broken. Such bravery and care are precious gifts to their children, from those who often have so little of anything else to offer. When we started the advocacy service 20 years ago, parents sought to find a way to express this care and summed it up by saying "You're in my heart while we're apart". We all owe it to children in care to find ways to let them know this.

About the author

Jacinta Swann is a principal social worker with extensive experience in family support, child protection, children in care and aftercare services in Ireland. She has been

instrumental in the development and management of the Clarecare Advocacy Service for Parents of Children in Care for over 20 years. Through Jacinta’s direct work with parents of children in care, she is committed to supporting parents to make meaningful contributions to the care process for the wellbeing of their children, and to be the best parents they can be for their children while they are in State care.

The Clarecare Advocacy Service for Parents of Children in Care, funded by Tusla–Child and Family Agency, evolved from parents asking who was there for them when they needed someone the most, at the loss of their child. It is one of the family support services provided by Clarecare, and it aims to support parents’ participation in the care process, for the wellbeing of their children. The service offers individual and group support to parents whose children are in the care of Tusla–Child and Family Agency (foster care or residential care) in County Clare. More information on the Clarecare Advocacy Service is available at www.clarecare.ie, by phone on 065-682 8178 or via email at info@clarecare.ie

Resources

www.clarecare.ie/services/family-support-services/advocacy-service-parents-children-care

www.clarecare.ie/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/Technology_Access_Booklet_low_res.pdf

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