

Family Action

**Family Star Evaluation:
Summary Report**

June 2013



EVALUATION OVERVIEW

The evaluation included an analysis of Family Action's Family Star data of more than 3,200 completed Stars; interviews with service users and staff across four locations; interviews with commissioners and Family Action's management; and a literature review.

The evaluation found the Family Star to be an effective management and measurement tool for family support work. A unique characteristic of the tool is that it engages families and frontline staff, as well as managers and commissioners in the journey of change, and provides timely management information to benchmark performance at an aggregated level.

Commissioners clearly value the tool and the evidence it can provide. The evaluation found that Family Star data can be used as a valuable interim indicator of distance travelled towards achieving longer-term outcomes and impact, for example to fulfil Payment by Results (PBR) criteria for Troubled Families work.

Service users engage with the Family Star, which gives them ownership of the change process. The Family Star clearly fits with Family Action's family-focused, service user-led, holistic approach and highlights the organisation's commitment to working in partnership with service users and the value of co-production.

Family Action is market-leading in using the Family Star, particularly around benchmarking and evidencing progress. The evaluation showed that Family Action's use of the Family Star is effective in generating data that can be used to evidence progress and benchmark change, at both an organisational and service level.

In order to use the Family Star effectively, it has to be integrated and embedded within an organisation's work processes. Family Action's innovative use of the Family Star means that it has taken a whole organisational approach to implementation and is embedding its use across the organisation. Investing in improving how the Family Star is used and implemented leads directly to improvements in the quality of the work.

The intensive family support provided by Family Action clearly reflects the elements of family support highlighted in the research that are necessary to ensure effective working with families with complex needs. The Family Star provides a clear, structured and measurable framework for delivering that support.

Family Action is distinct as an organisation in providing family-focused support for service users with mental health needs, and the Family Star data shows evidence of positive outcomes for this group of service users. Similarly, the evaluation highlighted the skills of practitioners in supporting parents in meeting their children's emotional needs.

Family Star data could be strengthened further by linking it (where appropriate) to other quantifiable outcome indicators and cost data. Linking the Family Star data to other outcomes data, such as child protection data, would complement the evidence provided by the Star.

Recommendations

- Due to the unique characteristics of the Family Star, local authorities should consider using the Star to benchmark their services to identify and support improvement and enable the engagement of families, staff and managers.
- The Family Star is an effective tool in engaging and supporting service users with mental health needs and, therefore, we would recommend its use with this client group.
- The evaluation highlighted that in order to use the Family Star effectively, staff need to have the skills and knowledge to support having 'difficult conversations' with service users. This highlights the importance of using professional staff to deliver intensive family support, and we recommend that this approach to delivery continues.

A. Introduction

Family Action has been providing services to vulnerable families since 1869. It works with more than 45,000 families a year providing practical, emotional and financial support through more than 100 services, based in communities across England. Intensive home-based professional family support is the lead service provided by Family Action. This model of delivery is based on the international evidence for providing effective family support (DCLG, 2012ⁱ; Lee *et al.* 2008ⁱⁱ; Kendall *et al.* 2011ⁱⁱⁱ; Lloyd *et al.* 2011^{iv}). Family Action also regularly carries out its own external evaluations of its support (MacLeod, 2011^v). In 2009, Family Action began using the Family Outcomes Star to support the strategic management and measurement of outcomes for its family support work. Family Action now has over 3,200 completed Family Stars and six licensed trainers providing training across the organisation. The purpose of this evaluation was to evaluate the effectiveness of the Family Star and Family Action's use of it to support and measure outcomes for families.

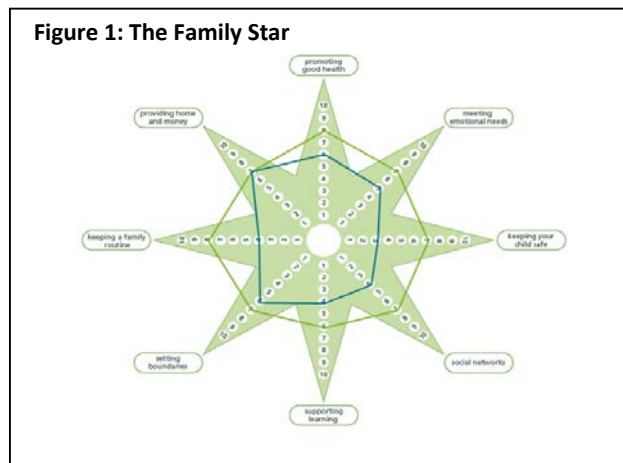
B. Research Methodology

The evaluation took a mixed methods approach which included:

- semi-structured interviews with strategic level staff within Family Action, Local Authority (LA) commissioners, and Family Action service managers;
- case-studies of three Family Action services using Family Star, which included consultations with practitioners, supervisors, service users, service managers, area managers and LA commissioners;
- analysis of Family Action's Family Star data for all families supported at the end of October 2012;
- a literature review of the evidence base for providing effective family support.

C. The Family Star and Family Action

The original version of the Outcomes Star was developed over ten years ago by Triangle Consulting for the homelessness sector and tailored versions are now available to support and measure change for a wide range of client groups¹. In 2009, Family Action formed part of the working group that developed the Family Star. The Family Star measures the journey of a family towards increased resilience, and is a strengths-based tool. It has eight core areas that have been found to be critical in enabling children to thrive² (see **Figure 1**). For each area, there is a ten point scale from 'Stuck' to 'Effective Parenting'.



D. Findings

The evaluation found the Family Star to be an effective management and measurement tool for family support work. A unique characteristic of the tool is that it engages families and frontline staff, as well as managers and commissioners in the journey of change, and provides timely management information to benchmark performance at an aggregated level. It is a holistic tool tailored to families' needs.

"It gives us information we never had before at that contract management level." (Commissioner)

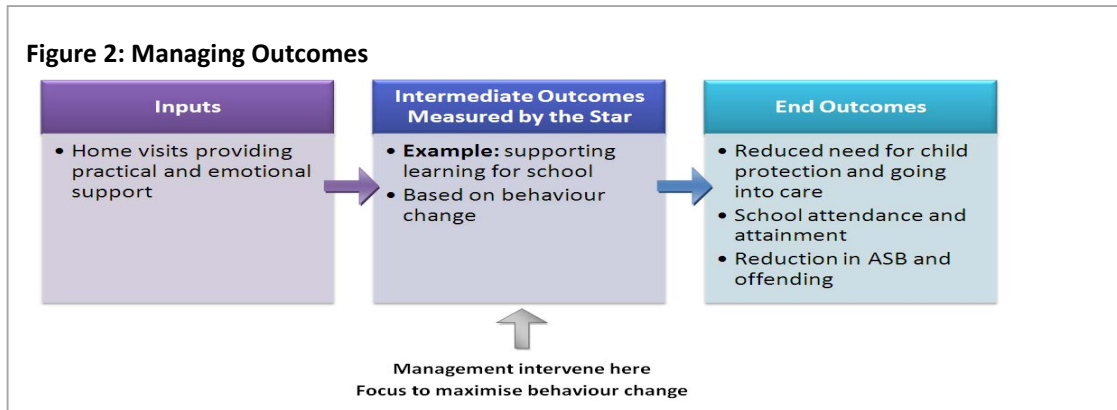
"Before we just used to use case studies to evidence outcomes, now case studies are a complement to the tool. A case study can only show one client at a time, we couldn't review all the families together. Whereas now ... we have more consistent information across all families." (Commissioner)

¹ See www.outcomesstar.org.uk

² Promoting good health, meeting emotional needs, keeping your child safe, social networks, supporting learning, setting boundaries, keeping a family routine and providing home and money.

D.i) Managing Outcomes for Families

Given that many of the family outcomes specified in current Payments By Results (PBR) contracts are high level outcomes (anti-social behaviour, school attendance etc.), and can take some time to achieve and evidence, it is important to have a measure of distance travelled towards meeting these outcomes. The Family Star is an effective tool for measuring intermediate outcomes and showing progress made to date towards ultimate targets. It also helps make the link between intensive family support and achieving these high level outcomes (see **Figure 2**). This can be seen as a significant use of the tool, demonstrating the nature, extent and timing of the impacts of family support on these particularly important areas of need. Through regular reviews, the use of the tool within Family Action also helps ensure that appropriate action is taken to address issues as they arise, which is further reinforced through supervision and day-to-day management.

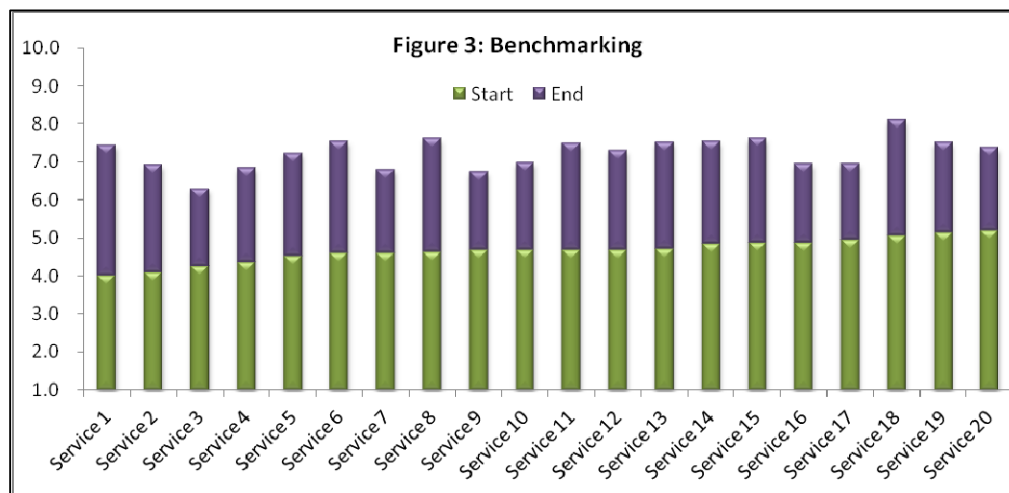


The Family Star data provides evidence of outcomes and impact for commissioners:

“Ofsted want to see the journey travelled, so anything we can provide to Ofsted is very welcome ...The outputs you get from the Family Star are very good.” (Commissioner)

D.ii) Benchmarking

Commissioners and managers supported the use of the Family Star as a benchmarking tool. The research showed that Family Action’s use of the Family Star was effective in generating data that can be used to evidence progress and benchmark change at both an organisational and service level. Furthermore, this data can be used as an analytical performance management tool to identify trends, anomalies and issues within and across services. Both managers and commissioners felt that the benchmarking of data across services, especially when managing more than one service within a LA, would be beneficial. **Figure 3** provides an example of how Family Star data was used to benchmark service performance within Family Action³.



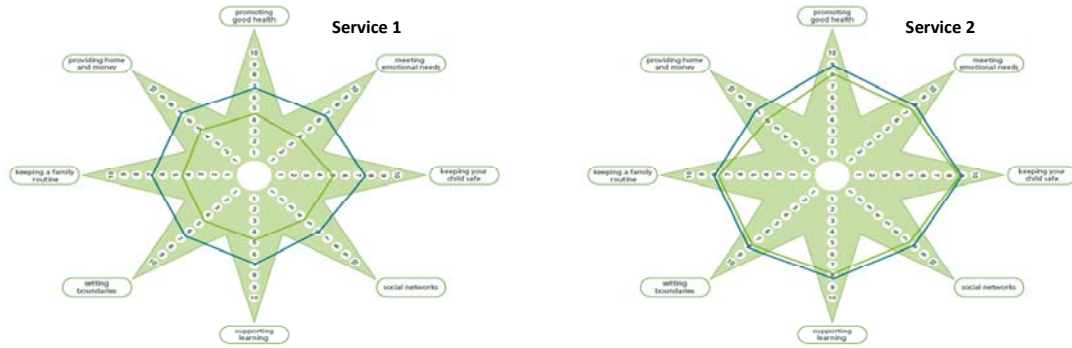
For example, it would be expected that those services working with families with particularly complex needs would have the lowest starting scores and that services delivering a similar type of support would be showing similar levels of change. The benchmarking data can be used to evidence and support these assumptions, as well identifying those

³ This data focuses on starting scores that were less than 7 as a proxy measure for areas worked on by the service.

services making above or below average progress. The Senior Management Group within Family Action reviews performance across all of its services. A case study of one such review is provided in **Figure 4**.

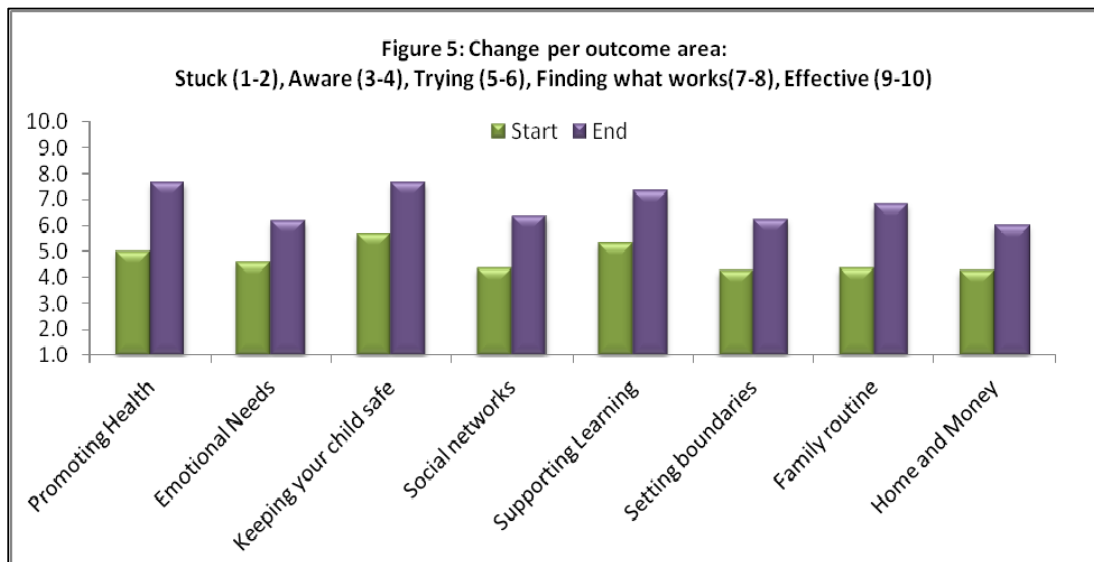
Figure 4: Case Study - Reviewing the Family Star Data

The senior management review identified differences across two similar services (see diagrams below), which prompted further investigation with both of the service managers. It was found that some families in the service with higher starting scores (Service 2) were responding defensively to the assessment work, which highlighted a training need for the team. A workshop was organised to share learning across the two services focusing on how to integrate the Star effectively into the assessment process. Further training in using the Star was planned for staff from Service 2, which focused on undertaking challenging conversations with families. Management of progress now takes place through individual and group supervisions and scoring is reviewed on a regular basis.



D.iii) Service Level Insights

Service level analysis of the Family Star data can provide valuable insights into the extent and nature of changes occurring, as well as highlighting areas for further investigation (see **Figure 5**). The Family Star data can be used by services to identify where families are struggling most (for this service: setting boundaries, family routines and home and money), as well as where they are evidencing most positive change (setting boundaries and family routines). Thus, the data can be used to show that this service was impacting on two of the three areas where families were evidencing most need, showing on average a move from being aware of issues (scoring 4), to moving towards finding what works (over 6).



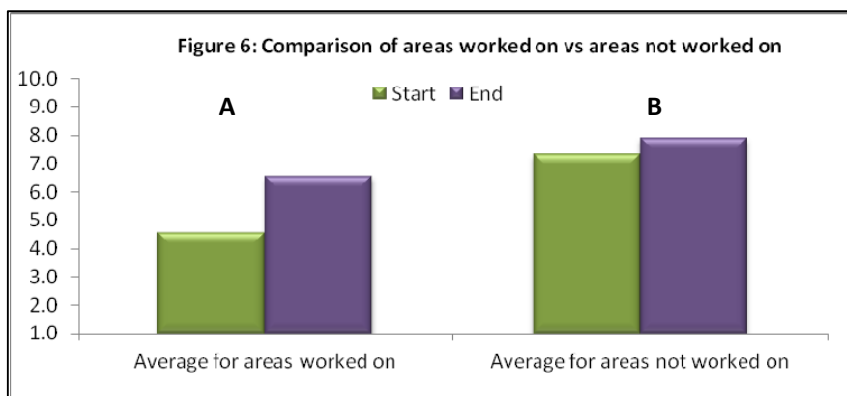
Evidence of Impact

The research found clear evidence that workers were helping service users gain an understanding of what emotional needs were (both for themselves and their children) and then supporting service users to meet their children's emotional needs: "[She's helping me understand the] *importance of sitting down and talking to my children and explaining to my children about your emotions and getting them to talk about how they feel. It's not just about me; it's about them as well.*" (Service User)

The Family Star helped service users understand the changes they needed to make to improve outcomes for their children. This service user had been unable to leave her house, her mental and physical health had deteriorated, and both she and her son were becoming increasingly isolated: "*I was a 2 to 3 stuck with getting out of the house. It wasn't a problem for me, as I don't mind being in the house all the time, but it made me realise it was a problem for [name of son]. So then I went up to a 3 or 4, because I was aware of it, and hopefully I will get higher and higher. It made me feel I wasn't so alone and I did have people helping me and it's helped me make improvements – now I'm leaving the house more.*" (Service User)

Service users valued the practical support provided by Family Action workers. The literature on providing effective intensive family support highlights the importance of providing practical 'hands on' interventions for families¹, addressing issues such as debt and housing. By addressing these practical issues, which are often all consuming for families, it also helps free them up to start thinking about addressing more deep seated issues within the family. "*I was stuck in a studio with my little boy and the council wouldn't re-house us. Then [name of family worker] stepped in, got some letters sent and I am now on the list to be re-housed.*" (Service User)

At the service level (see **Figure 6**), comparison of Family Star data for areas that were 'worked on' (A), i.e. those areas of support that were identified within action plans, with those areas 'not worked on' (B), i.e. not identified in action plans as areas to work on, provides further exemplification of the changes made in those areas where families needed most support.



The evaluation showed that managers also found the Family Star effective as a performance management tool and provided a more reflective approach to service delivery:

"As a manager, I have a better understanding of what the service is doing and what it's there for." (Manager)

"When we looked at the Family Star, it gave us the information we needed [to challenge the practitioner]. Her scores were very high to begin with. So the Family Star opened up a discussion ... we could say 'well this shows it'." (Manager)
To help resolve this issue an action plan was put in place, which included the practitioner observing a colleague complete a Family Star and also having her completion of a Family Star observed.

"Before we went in and delivered a service. Now service users and practitioners come together to think what's needed. We never allowed that to happen before." (Manager)

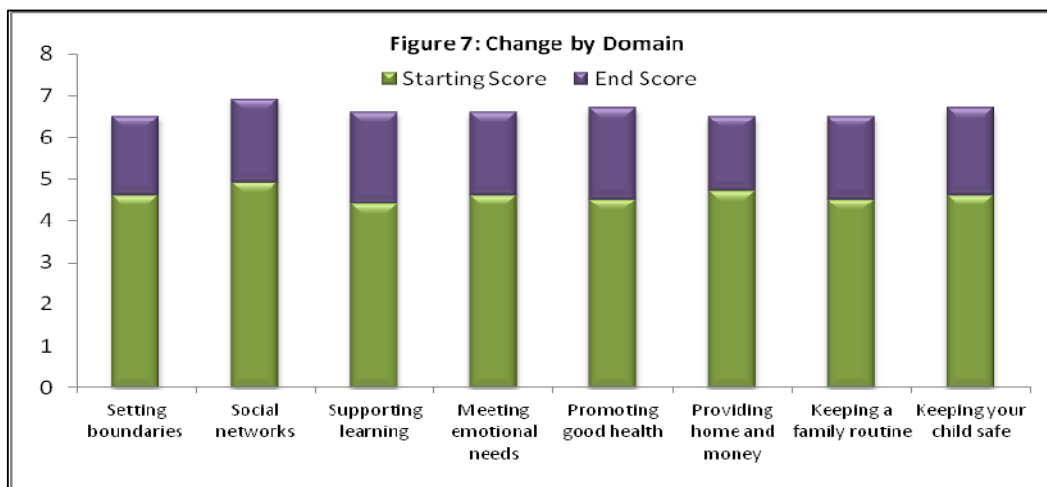
For practitioners the Family Star helped them monitor progress and ensure their accountability:

"It helps me structure the work I've done ... It makes it easier for me to say to [name of supervisor] 'I've done this and this', but it also helps flag up areas where we're not making progress." (Worker)

"It's much more structured now than before ... Now I'm going for a reason and they know why I'm coming ... It also makes me feel accountable, [it] makes sure I'm doing what I'm meant to be doing and if have to escalate up, it provides evidence of what I've done." (Worker)

D.iv) Organisational Insights

Analysis at the organisational level can be used to identify overall trends and evidence change by key characteristics such as age, ethnicity, gender, type of need (e.g. mental health needs) and length of support. Analysis of Family Star data at the Family Action organisational level reveals evidence of positive change for 86% of service users. It also provides an indication of areas of impact (see **Figure 7**) and shows that the approach to delivery is roughly equally strong in effecting positive change in each of the areas worked on.



On average, service users moved from a score of just over 4 ('aware'), to a score of 6 ('trying') or 7 ('finding what works'). In practice this meant that when service users began working with Family Action they were aware of the difficulties they faced but needed help in developing strategies to address them. Working with Family Action helped them to develop strategies to address the issues they faced, for example in relation to setting boundaries.

"I needed help with boundaries 'cos my kids overawe me. It was giving them boundaries and getting them in a routine ... and it's working." (Service User)

"It was the boundaries with mine, and to be consistent, because I know what to do but sometimes I'll say 'no' and then five minutes later, because they're bugging me I'll say 'yes'. You have to teach yourself, as well as the kids, and change things with you. I have three kids and they're all at different stages. So, it's trying to start the baby off so she doesn't change it and then change the other two, who've already got their habits that I've let them get away." (Service User)

Analysis by key characteristics highlights the strengths of Family Action in supporting service users with mental health needs: *"We commissioned Family Action, because they could deliver on family focused mental health support, and we continue to commission them because they are the only service able to do this"* (Commissioner). The data shows that 29% of service users supported by Family Action have mental health needs and that progress made by these service users was in line with, or slightly better than, progress for service users without mental health needs. The strengths-based approach of the Outcomes Star is based on the theory of recovery within the mental health field and service users with mental health needs clearly responded positively to the tool. It was felt that the most effective component of the Family Star in supporting parents with mental health needs was that it helped them focus on the needs of their children and gain an understanding of how their mental health impacted on their children's outcomes.

"[The Family Star is] showing that even service users with severe, enduring mental health issues can reflect and think and give you feedback. The old medical model, where they couldn't do anything or engage with anything and 'just give them medication', doesn't work and Family Star is proving that." (Manager)

"It helps you highlight why you are having a backlash and gets you to think about it. Maybe one thing is affected by another thing, and unless you think in those terms you're lost." (Service User)

Analysis by key characteristics, such as length of time service users are supported, can also be used as a valuable performance management tool to review performance at key points in time. For example, the data showed that progress in a number of domains, 'Keeping Your Child Safe', 'Meeting Emotional Needs' and 'Social Networks', improved the longer service users were supported. Conversely, for 'Supporting Learning' and 'Promoting Good Health', most change was evidenced within the first three months of intervention.

D.v) Practitioners and Service Users

The research found strong evidence of parental and practitioner engagement with the Family Star. There was also evidence that use of the Star helped develop service users' resilience and helped workers reflect on their practice, particularly in terms of improving outcomes. Service users engaged with the tool, because it gave them ownership of the change process. The literature on providing effective support for families with complex needs highlights the importance of family-led decision making and the co-production of action plans and setting of targets and goals. The Family Star reflects this approach. It is a strengths-based tool, which sees service users as the experts on the issues they face. The Family Star helped service users to evidence and review the progress made. Importantly, it also helped them manage issues when progress was not made, helping them to develop resilience.

There was also evidence that the Family Star helped workers reflect on how their relationship with service users impacted on the outcomes achieved. Research has shown that developing an effective professional relationship makes a real difference in improving outcomes for service users, and that *"effective relationships are not an added extra but are core to the delivery of effective services"* (Bell and Smerdon, 2011)^{vi}. Importantly, the Family Star also provided a framework with which workers could challenge service users and have difficult conversations.

"With my debts, I said higher, and she said: 'Are you sure? I'm seeing ten bills with red writing on them and you're hiding these bills in the drawer, you're lower than what you think'. They challenge you, and when they pull it [Family Star] out, you acknowledge that: 'Yes, I am in a bit of trouble'." (Service User)

"I said a higher score, but she [practitioner] said 'what about their eczema needs?' They all have eczema, and ... I need to focus on that more. It [Family Star] helps you focus on things more. Sometimes you think 'well I've fed them, they're watching TV they're ok', but there are other things you need to think about." (Service User)

"It enables workers to have a whole new process of challenge and discussion of where the score is. In traditional solution-focused work you just accepted it. Now they have the opportunity to challenge with the guidance, that whole conversation is much better and much safer." (Commissioner)

D.vi) Implementation

In order to use the Family Star effectively, it has to be integrated and embedded within an organisation's work processes, and in Family Action the Family Star is embedded within the organisation's Safeguarding Standards.

"The Family Star is part of being a family support worker, and if they're reluctant to do that then they're not fulfilling their role as a family support worker." (Manager)

Family Action uses professional staff (rather than volunteers) to deliver its intensive, home-based, family support. The research showed that effective use of the Family Star requires commitment and the development of key skills (e.g. having difficult conversations) at an organisational, service and individual level. Family Action's experience of implementing the Family Star has also shown that to be effective and become embedded within organisational processes staff need to be engaged in data analysis at the service level through team meetings and benchmarking across services. Quality assurance processes also play an important role in the effective implementation of the Family Star, ensuring that the data is accurate, that the tool is used consistently and that practitioners have the skills and knowledge to challenge families and have those difficult conversations. Improving the quality of Family Star scoring improves the quality of the work. Three key elements within Family Action's quality assurance processes help ensure that the Family Star data is accurate, and that staff are supported to use the tool effectively:

- scores are reviewed during supervision;
- training is provided on use of the tool;
- the data is audited at a service and organisational level to identify exceptions and anomalies.

D.vii) Safeguarding

Service level staff (practitioners and managers) felt that the Family Star was a useful tool for monitoring improvement in parenting skills and concerns that could lead to safeguarding issues, such as lack of boundaries, or children displaying challenging behaviour. Although the main tools for monitoring safeguarding within Family Action are risk assessments and ongoing observation, the Family Star was felt to provide a clear, holistic framework within which to challenge families and ensure that issues (or potential issues) were identified and addressed. It was also noted that the Family Star provided an opportunity for service users to focus on the positive aspects of their parenting, something which families with complex needs rarely had the opportunity to do.

"I thought I had an issue with everything, and everything was going wrong, but doing the Family Star points out stuff you are good at and not so good at. So it's a lot better than saying 'I need help with everything'. When you do the Star you realise you're not as bad at some things as you thought you were." (Service User)

When using the Family Star it is important to:

- be aware that there can be differences in what families, referrers and workers want the support to focus on. This is an important issue, and needs to be managed carefully with clear lines of accountability so that all stakeholders agree on the issues being addressed. Family Action's Safeguarding Standards are clear that for those families where there are safeguarding concerns that these take priority;
- ensure that the focus on the child is not lost within the Family Star's focus on parenting. Practitioners need to be clear that they must account for the needs and views of children within the families supported. Use of the Child Star (which will be called 'My Star') should help facilitate this process.

E) Conclusion and Recommendations

Conclusion

The intensive family support provided by Family Action clearly reflects the elements of family support highlighted in the research that are necessary to ensure effective working with families with complex needs. The Family Star provides a clear, structured and measurable framework for delivering that support. Effective implementation of the Family Star is important. This includes processes to use and quality assure the data. Family Action's innovative use of the Family Star means that it has taken a whole organisational approach to implementation and is embedding its use across the organisation.

The Family Star clearly fits with Family Action's family-focused, service user-led, holistic approach and highlights the organisation's commitment to working in partnership with service users and the value of co-production. The Family Star gives service users ownership of the change process, and also helps them develop the skills and resilience to manage the issues they face, which should help to sustain positive outcomes post-intervention. Family Action is distinct as an organisation in providing family focused support for service users with mental health needs, and the Family Star data shows evidence of positive outcomes for this group of service users. Similarly, the evaluation highlighted the skills of practitioners in supporting parents in meeting their children's emotional needs, which could be highlighted as a key organisational strength. In order to win contracts and grow the organisation, there is a need for Family Action to continue to draw on these strengths as commissioners clearly value the tool and the evidence it can provide.

The evaluation highlighted that Family Star data can be used as a valuable interim indicator of distance travelled towards achieving longer-term outcomes and impact, for example to fulfil PBR criteria. Family Action is market-leading in using the Family Star, particularly around benchmarking and evidencing progress. The research showed that Family Action's innovative use of the Family Star is effective in generating data that can be used to evidence progress and benchmark change, at both an organisational and service level. Family Star data could be strengthened further by linking it (where appropriate) to more objective, quantifiable outcome indicators. Linking the Family Star data to other outcomes data, such as child protection data, would help reinforce the evidence provided by the Star, as well as providing important evidence of outcomes for issues that the Star might not focus on directly, such as domestic violence.

Recommendations

- Due to the unique characteristics of the Family Star, local authorities should consider using the Star to benchmark their services to identify and support improvement and enable the engagement of families, staff and managers.
- The Family Star is an effective tool in engaging and supporting service users with mental health needs and, therefore, we would recommend its use with this client group.
- The evaluation highlighted that in order to use the Family Star effectively, staff need to have the skills and knowledge to support having 'difficult conversations' with service users. This highlights the importance of using professional staff to deliver intensive family support, and we recommend that this approach to delivery continues.

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- ⁱ DCLG (Department for Communities and Local Government) (2012). *Working with Troubled Families: A Guide to the Evidence and Good Practice* [online]. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/working-with-troubled-families-a-guide-to-evidence-and-good-practice>
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- ^v MacLeod M. (2011). *Building Bridges: An Independent Evaluation of a Family Support Service* [online]. Available at: http://www.family-action.org.uk/uploads/documents/BB_Report_Final.pdf
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