# CELCIS blog – It’s a family affair

## How a maori model of improving care experience has been transformative for a family in Glasgow

I'm Karen Frew and I'm currently lead officer for public protection in Glasgow. Prior to taking up this post, I was an assistant service manager and the north east of the city. And one of my primary tasks was to do chair child protection case conferences. So this particular case, the children had been on the child protection register for two years, there were significant concerns about physical and emotional neglect. There was a really tight care plan around the family and a really good effective team who were involved with the family. But there was very little positive progress at all. So the decision was made at one of the child protection case conferences, that if we couldn't secure better outcomes and safer, more protective care for the children, that we would have to look at removing them from their mother's care, it was a step that no one really wanted to have to take because we recognised that there was a strong bond between the boys and their mother. But we felt that the care that they were receiving was just becoming too dangerous and too harmful. In the meantime, a new team had been set up in the north east of the city to pilot the family group decision making model. It came from New Zealand where work had been done to support Maori children who were over represented within the care system there. And it was very much about looking at what are the strengths within the extended family network – what support what, protection can they bring for children, rather than removing them completely, and taking away all of those potential relationships, potential carers, and areas of support that a family can bring. So it was very new at that point, it wasn't well established. And the referral was made into the team. So they became involved and they undertook the process whereby they engaged with all members of the family, including the children, and the young people involved, they also contacted extended family members, they have an extended family network search function too. So what you can sometimes find is that a family will only tell you about certain people that are around them. There may be other people that they've lost touch with or that they don't want to know what their current circumstances are. The family network search function allows you to expand your knowledge and find potential other sources of support for the children. So, at that point, I suppose we hadn't really seen that model in action, we weren't really sure how it was going to play out in reality, but this case could probably be a kind of textbook example of the success that it can actually bring. I think the timing of it was crucial as well, in that the mum and the two boys were evicted from their own tenancy and had to move in with their maternal grandmother. Whilst they hadn't been estranged, I think they had been not as close as they could have been for a number of years. And we subsequently found out that some of that was probably due to domestic abuse within the parental relationship, which nobody had known about. So that had led to mom and the boys becoming quite isolated from the rest of their family. So there was a forced closeness that happened then. And that coupled with the family group decision making input where the concerns were all really clearly laid out for an extended family, who were I think it's fair to say we're pretty horrified at what had been going on because mom had become very adept at keeping people at arm's length. So they would probably still have said that they were quite close to mom, that, you know, they would see how they would see the boys. But it wasn't a real closeness. And they were very rarely in the family home. So they had no idea what things were what actually like. I think the model engaged the family really well. It was it was very non judgmental, it's very much strengths based. And also it was separate and distinct from the Social Work Area team. You know, it's not part of the main team. It's in a separate building, they've their own premises. And the staff don't have the title of social worker within that. And I think all of that helps to take away some of the stigma, and maybe make people a bit more open to engaging with the staff that are becoming involved. The emphasis is on how can the family solve the problem? So it's not about social work staff or a teacher or a school nurse or somebody from Barnardos sitting down and saying this is what I want you to do in respect of your son or your nephew or your grandchild. This is about these are the problems. How do you propose that they are fixed? What are you going to do about that? So as I see the family are well prepared. And then they're given as much time as they need within the family group decision making premises. And it's a relaxed environment. It's not too formal, there's catering provided for people. So they can really take their time and they can really thrash it out amongst themselves and come up with some resolution to the problems that have been identified. They can be given what's called the bottom line. And that can include things like a certain person, having no unsupervised contact, or whatever. But they are told what those bottom lines are, what the plan must include or anything that it mustn’t. And this family worked really, really hard. And they came up with a really great plan - really concrete things that would be easy to measure how successful they were or not, and each family member that was involved and took on a particular role. So, it could be things like, you know, how we're going to make sure that the boys got to school? How are they going to get to their medical appointments to get their health needs met. If mom wasn't going to be emotionally available for the boys because of her own issues, who was going to be there? Who and how could the boys get in touch with somebody if they needed someone to be there for them. And it was really comprehensive. And the family were very, very committed to that. As I said, they were pretty horrified. They had no idea that things had gotten so bad, they had no idea the extent of the multi-agency involvement around the two boys. And they were absolutely adamant that they were going to fix this and that things would never be as bad again. So it was, it was a really great process to be on the periphery of and see the outcome. Because I'm always fairly sceptical, I suppose, having been around for a very long time in social work, and I’ve seen lots of new things tried and tested out. But that certainly the feedback from everyone was that it was very positive and things were very different for the boys. So going into that case conference and actually hearing, not just that mom was keeping appointments and the boys were getting to the doctor when they should be that attendance at school had improved and they were cleaner looking. But actually hearing from the boys themselves, I think was probably the greatest testament to how they said that it actually worked. And hearing what the boys were achieving as well. You know, for instance, the older boy was just shutting himself off, and actually was taken to going into a cupboard under the stairs and play on his computer. And then to hear that he had become a mentor within school, and that he had a girlfriend that he was really coming out of a shell, that he didn't spend as much time in the cupboard at home or the safe base at school for them, that their achievement and attainment at school had improved, because they were there more often. But they were also more receptive to the learning that was available to them. It's, as I say, a textbook example of how a strengths based, family based and family focused model actually can turn things around significantly for children. The school has, I can't remember what it's called, it doesn't have a particular name, but it's a base for young people who are struggling. They can go there during the day at breaks and so on, maybe they're not so great socially and being out in the canteen area or the playground is too much for them, they can go in there. Also, some young people have it written in as part of their timetable. If there are particular classes that they struggle with, then they can go along and do a different type of work within the base. And some young people use it a lot.

Simply because school is too much for them - it's just overwhelming. And this is a quieter, less busy place where they have access to really empathetic engaging staff who are willing to listen to them. I suppose it varies for each young person as to what they need and how they might want to use it. When we were working on this as an example a good practice in northeast I really was keen for it not to be seen as you know, everything was terrible for two years and then family group decision making came in and saved the day. Whilst you know, they did a wonderful job and absolutely that was what this family needed. I think throughout the course of the registration when I had been chairing the case conferences, I was so impressed by the core group that were around these children. Everybody was really, really committed to making positive changes for them. And to working really hard to support mum, to in turn then support her children. And although there might not have been the positive outcomes from that work, it was a really effective and cohesive unit, and it was just the small things that they did in terms of how they made sure that they communicated with each other, and that every part of the core group knew what was happening. It was almost like a kind of WhatsApp group chat that they had set up on email, so that any information just got sent out to everybody. They were very supportive of each other as well, because it was a draining case to be working on. It was really frustrating, because everybody was working so hard, and there was just no improvement at all. So when we sat down to draw together a presentation, as I say, as an example of good practice for our learning and development sessions, it was like a good supervision session. People were really open and really reflective. And even though their involvement at that point with the children has ended, they still very much presented as a cohesive unit and a team that worked well together.