



The Mockingbird Family Model – Evaluation Summary

Background

The Mockingbird Family Model (MFM) is an approach to supporting foster carers and children and young people placed with them. Clusters of between six and ten ‘satellite homes’ are grouped together to form a ‘constellation’. The constellation is supported by ‘hub carers’ who provide a range of support including: planned and emergency respite care; regular constellation meetings and activities; learning and development opportunities; informal one-to-one advice and support.

Aims and Objectives

MFM aims to ensure that young people in foster care experience improved placement stability; stronger birth family and sibling relationships; more successful early reunifications with birth family; increased successful transition to other permanence options; more opportunities for the development of strong and lasting relationships with adults and within communities; improved educational outcomes. The model also aims to ensure that foster carers experience: improved peer support, including uptake of respite with consistent carers; reduction in stress; improved retention rates.

The evaluation

The evaluation aimed to explore the impact of the MFM on foster carers and the children and young people they support, along with identifying the practical issues associated with implementing the model in the English context. A mixed method approach was used which included: analysis of key documents and 23 structured telephone interviews with staff stakeholders undertaken in all eight host services, along with observations and monthly monitoring data submitted by hub and satellite carers in the seven host services that were operational during the evaluation period. In four ‘in-depth’ sites a focus group of supervising social workers, an online survey of all foster carers, face-to-face and telephone, in-depth interviews with participating fostering households, and an analysis of costs and resources associated with MFM were also carried out.

Key findings

At the end of the evaluation period 16 constellations with 106 fostering households were operational. The evaluation also found that MFM may facilitate some of the conditions that are positively associated with improved placement stability and foster carer retention: Approximately 4% of the children in MFM experienced an unplanned placement change, which is lower than the national picture, estimated in 2015 to be in the region of 8% of all children looked after. None of the foster carers participating in the MFM ceased to foster during the evaluation timeframe. This

compares to a national estimate of around 6% of foster carers ceasing to foster in the year 2014-2015.

Overall, evaluation participants were very positive about the model, reporting that it enabled foster carers and children and young people placed with them to:

- Develop supportive, non-judgemental peer relationships within the wider community;
- Access one to one support from hub carers, who were described as extremely responsive to immediate requests for support and flexible to individual's needs and circumstances. The hub carers' own experiences and knowledge of fostering was particularly valued;
- Increase the use of respite and ensure that respite was provided by the same person on every occasion.

It is evident that some elements of the model were less developed by the end of the evaluation timeframe, including improving educational outcomes, supporting birth family relationships and transitions to permanence. However, given the short timeframe for implementing and evaluating MFM, these outcomes may be achieved as the model becomes embedded and further developed at both local and national levels.

Economic analysis

The ongoing cost of running a constellation was estimated to be in the region of £30,491 per year including payments to hub carers, along with additional payments for activities and mileage. The estimated figure does not include payments for respite care or the costs for staffing, including the Constellation Liaison Worker (CLW). The costs of MFM may be off-set by potential costs avoided as a result of the impact of the project but it was too early to assess these savings.

Key Recommendations

Fostering services considering implementing MFM should:

- Allow sufficient time to recruit the most appropriate hub carers;
- Ensure that the aims and principles of MFM are clearly conveyed to potential satellite carers and social workers and to explore different ways of ensuring a sense of commitment to all elements of the model from all involved;
- Consider the constitution of the constellations to ensure that all children and young people have the opportunities to develop friendships with others at a similar age and stage;
- Consider the composition of constellations to include more children with siblings who are also looked after, or for children for whom their existing placement was not one of permanence. This may enable these aspects of the model to be further developed;
- Ensure that a skilled project team is available to support the implementation of MFM.

This evaluation study was carried out between April 2015 and March 2016 by Samantha McDermid, Claire Baker and Doug Lawson with Lisa Holmes from the Centre for Child and Family Research, Loughborough University.

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