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# **FAMILY PARTICIPATION IN INITIAL CHILD PROTECTION CASE CONFERENCES**

**Final Report on an Evaluation of a  
Pilot Project for Liverpool Area  
Child Protection Committee**

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**February 1993**

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**Report on a Pilot Project for  
Liverpool Area Child Protection Committee**

by

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### **ABSTRACT**

In November 1991 Liverpool Area Child Protection Committee (A.C.P.C.) embarked upon a pilot project to investigate the feasibility of adopting the practice of family participation in initial case conferences in its area.

Family members were invited to attend initial conferences held in three social service districts (B/F, C, I/K) between November 1991 and January 1992. There were a total of 20 such case conferences.

Liverpool A.C.P.C. commissioned an independent researcher from the University of Manchester, to carry out an evaluation of the pilot project. The views of agency workers who attended the conferences, and the views of family members who were invited to the conferences, were gathered for the purposes of the evaluation.

81 agency workers completed a total of 125 questionnaires for the 20 conferences covered by the pilot period. Interviews were conducted with at least one family member from 17 of the 20 families represented by these conferences.

This report discusses the views and experiences of agency workers and family members involved in the 20 'pilot' conferences, and draws lessons from this data for the future of family participation in Liverpool.

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A great deal of assistance was given to this project from the staff of the child protection unit at social service headquarters, and by individual social workers who arranged meetings between myself and family members. This help has been invaluable in terms of carrying out this evaluation.

The comments I received following presentation of the interim report were much appreciated and I hope that I have incorporated them adequately in this final report.

I would like to record my sincere appreciation to all the members of the working group and their colleagues, who gave up their time to speak to me about their personal and agency attitudes to family participation.

Last, but by no means least, I would like to record a heart-felt thanks to Stephanie Jackson for all her work and forbearance in typing this report.

While a very large number of people have been immensely generous with their time and energy, the author would like to stress that the views expressed in this report are his own and do not necessarily reflect the view of any agency or individual associated with Liverpool Area Child Protection Committee.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Up until the late 1980s it had been fairly widespread practice not to invite carers or other family members to initial child protection case conferences (henceforth referred to as 'conferences'). However, in recent years there has been increasing pressure for family members to be invited to conferences e.g. Working Together, the Cleveland Inquiry Report and B.A.S.W. guidelines. In some areas family members are now routinely invited to attend the conference, but overall this practice is still at a relatively early stage.

The practice of inviting family members to attend, and more importantly, participate in conferences has raised many issues; such as the problem of discussing confidential information in the presence of particular family members, the fear of aggression or violence from carers, and concerns that agency workers may be inhibited in discussing sensitive topics in front of family members. Given the challenges presented by family participation, a number of ACPCs have carried out pilot projects which they have had evaluated in order to find out how this practice works out in their particular area e.g. Avon, Gloucestershire, Hackney.

In 1990 and 1991 there was considerable discussion within, and between, agencies in Liverpool, concerning the implementation of family participation. It was decided that a pilot project would be carried out and that this would be evaluated by an independent researcher. The results of that evaluation are contained within this report.

## 2. METHODOLOGY

### Sample

All nine social service districts were asked whether they wished to take part in the pilot project. Three of these nine districts opted to take part: these were B/F, C and I/K.

The pilot project was based upon all initial case conferences held between 1st November 1991 and 31st January 1992. Only initial case conferences were included in the pilot: either those where a family had been subject to a child protection concern for the first time, or a 'known' family, in which a new incident or concern had arisen.

All agency workers at these conferences were asked to complete a questionnaire (Appendix I). The questionnaire asked agency workers to report on how they felt that the conference had been affected by the presence, or absence, of a family member.

Interviews were held with family members, both those who attended the conferences in the pilot project, and those who opted not to do so. The interview schedule (Appendix II) was semi-structured and was designed to explore how family members had responded to participation; both in principle, and in practice.

### Reasons why conferences were called

There were a total of 20 initial child protection conferences in districts B/F, C and I/K between 1st November 1991 and 31st January 1992. As Table 1 shows, the large majority of these conferences were called due to concerns around physical or sexual abuse.

**Table 1**      **Reasons why the Conference was Called**

Description	N	%
Physical abuse	7	35
Sexual abuse	3	15
Grave concern (general)	6	30
Grave concern (physical)	3	15
Grave concern (sexual)	1	5
TOTAL	20	100



### Attendance at conference by agency workers

A total of 271 invitations were sent out to agency workers (excluding NSPCC social workers, students and observers) to attend the 20 case conferences included in this pilot study. The 20 conferences were attended by 183 people, or 68% of all those who had been invited.

It had been hoped that this evaluation would include approaches to the agency 'non-attenders', in order to find out why they had not attended, and in particular, to discover whether any had stayed away specifically because a family member may have been present. Unfortunately, there was insufficient time to question the 88 agency non-attenders. However, it is possible to speculate upon some of the factors which may have lay behind this non-attendance.

Table 2 lists the non-attenders by agency. It is clear from these data that a significant proportion of the non-attenders would not normally have been expected to attend the conferences e.g. G.P.s, other doctors and local authority solicitors. Doctors and solicitors accounted for 45% of all non-attenders. Other non-attendance may have been due either to an agency worker feeling that they did not have anything to contribute to the conference, or because the agency worker had other commitments on the day of the conference e.g. schools staff.

**Table 2**      **Non-Attendance by Agency Workers**

Description	N	%
G.P.	19	22
School doctor	6	7
Hospital doctor	3	3
Police surgeon	2	2
Family day unit doctor	1	1
School nurse	4	5
Health visitor	4	5
Nurse manager	3	3
City solicitor	9	10
EWO	8	9
SSD	7	8
Police	6	7
School	5	6
Other L.A. S/W	3	3
Probation	2	2
Other	6	7
<hr/> TOTAL	<hr/> 88	<hr/> 100

Given these factors and the overall attendance rate of 68%, it did not appear that family participation had any major adverse effect upon the willingness of agency workers to attend conferences. At the same time, the data in Table 2 do suggest that some agency workers may have been deterred from attending.

### **Agency workers' questionnaire response rate**

Questionnaires were sent to all agency workers who attended the 20 'pilot' case conferences. Of the 183 questionnaires which were sent out 125 were completed and returned. This represents a 68% response rate which is very respectable for this type of study.

Agency workers were asked to give their views on how the conference had functioned from a number of different perspectives e.g. had the general operation of the conference been affected, to what extent did family members participate and had their own behaviour been affected. The questionnaire was also used to gather information of a more general nature, such as the nature and degree of training the respondent had received and recommendations from respondents as to how the practice of family participation might be improved.

It should be noted that the 125 questionnaires were completed by only 81 different individuals, as some agency workers completed more than one questionnaire. One Chairperson, for example, attended ten pilot conferences, and completed a questionnaire for each conference. However, this was the exception, and if a person did attend more than one conference then it was usually only two or three at the most.

The data presented in this report has been analysed in terms of questionnaires (N=125) rather than respondents (N=81). There are pros and cons with each method, but it was felt that the former would give a more meaningful impression of the situation conference by conference.

The number of questionnaires which were completed by workers from the different agencies represented at the conferences is given in Table 3. The contribution made by different agencies to the 125 questionnaires which form the basis of agency input to this evaluation, is given in Table 5. Just over one-half of all questionnaires were completed by social service staff, including Chairpersons and Recorders. If the 40 Chairperson and Recorder questionnaires are excluded, the social services input is considerably reduced but remains as the largest single group.

**Table 3****Agency Workers Completing Questionnaires**

Description	RESPONSES	
	N	%
Social services department	65	53
Nursing	24	20
Police	9	7
Other stat. S/W	6	5
Medical	6	5
School	5	4
Voluntary S/W	4	3
Probation	3	2
Other	3	2
<u>TOTAL</u>	<u>125</u>	<u>101*</u>

(\* does not equal 100 because of rounding)

After social services, the second largest number of questionnaires were completed by members of the nursing profession. All the remaining agencies e.g. police, medical and education, accounted for a relatively small number of questionnaires. Although social services and nursing had a numerical domination in terms of completed questionnaires, this may not have influenced the findings in any particular direction as there appeared to be significant divergence of opinion within most, if not all, agencies.

### **Attendance at conference by family members**

At least one member of a child's family was present in 17 (85%) of the conferences. A detailed breakdown of family member attendance is given in Appendix III. A summary of attendance by carers is given in Table 4.

**Table 4****Attendance of Case Conferences by Carers**

Description	N	%
All carers attended	9	45
All invited carers attended but some exclusions	5	25
Not all invited carers attended	3	15
No carers attended	3	15
<u>TOTAL</u>	<u>20</u>	<u>100</u>

These data show very clearly that carers are, in general, very keen to attend child protection conferences. This is born out by the interviews with family members. In 17 out of 20 conferences (85%) at least one carer attended. In one of the three remaining conferences the single mother was ill on the day of the conference but she did submit a written report; in a second conference the father appeared to be suffering from some form of mental illness and was also preventing his wife from attending. In only one family could it be said that the carer - a single mother - consciously chose not to attend the conference.

In three families the child's father decided not to attend the conference.

There are a number of other points regarding family attendance, which are worth highlighting:

- five fathers or father figures, were excluded from the conferences. Detailed information concerning the reasons for these exclusions was not available but in most circumstances it appeared to be due to the difficulty which would have been presented by the perpetrator being in the same meeting as the child and/or the child's mother.
- in three conferences an older child, who was the subject of the conference, was present
- in six of the seventeen 'attended' conferences the family member was accompanied by a 'supporter'. In all but one case this was a grandparent
- in the vast majority of conferences (85%) the family was able to attend the whole conference
- in three families the child's father chose not to attend the conference.

Interviews were held with at least one parent from 17 of the 20 families covered by the 'pilot' conferences. A breakdown of the persons with whom the interviews were held is given in Appendix III. In general, family members were quite willing to be interviewed and made many interesting points concerning participation. A large part of the credit for the positive manner in which the families approached the evaluation, must go to the social workers who set up the meetings between the family members and the author.

There was a large, although not complete overlap, between the 'attending' families and the 'interviewed' families. 15 of the 17 families who attended the conference agreed to be interviewed, along with two of the three non-attending families. In both of the non-interviewed, non-attending families, the conference was called because of concerns around child sexual abuse. Despite assurances that the interview was concerned only with 'participation' and not the reason for which the conference had been called, these families obviously felt too anxious to take part in the evaluation.

### 3. TRAINING

The evaluation offered an opportunity to measure the amount, and the type, of training which agency workers had received regarding family participation. Respondents were asked to report on any training which they had received whether with a previous employer; with their current employer but outside of the pilot project, and finally, training which was provided as part of the pilot project.

In 36 (29%) of the 125 questionnaires, the respondent stated that they had not received any training whatsoever.

As discussed above some respondents completed more than one questionnaire, so this finding should not be taken as a precise measure of the level of training amongst agency workers within the Liverpool A.C.P.C. area. However, what the figures did reveal is that within the pilot project case conferences an average of almost one-third of all participants had not received any training. A breakdown of how training was provided to respondents is given in Table 5.

**Table 5**      **Training Received by Agency Workers**

Description	RESPONSES	
	N	%*
With previous employer	4	3
With current employer (excl. p.p.)	28	22
Half day conference	44	35
One-day workshop	36	29
Other training in an agency	9	7
Other training	23	18
None	36	29

(\* as a percentage of all 125 'responses')

Comments made by agency workers in the 'training' and in the 'recommendations' section of the questionnaire, made it clear that they felt training must be an essential component of the practice of family participation. This is illustrated by the following, fairly typical, remarks.

A social worker who attended the half day conference and the one-day workshop:

Have attended one-day workshop which was inter-agency based. This was very valuable but as with any training you only have a "taste" of the pilot scheme. Preparation should be on-going prior to the scheme and reviewed periodically.

A recorder who received training prior to pilot project and who also attended both the conference and the workshop:

Preparation changed my opinion of parental participation.

Conversely a senior probation officer who had not received any training commented:

None. Consequently I found myself tongue-tied by the perceived need to phrase my comments clearly, accurately and acceptably! It does need thinking about/preparing for.

The evaluation highlighted other important aspects of training. Foremost amongst these was the need for training to be on a multi-disciplinary basis. A number of respondents pointed to the fact that case conferences brought together workers who, while having quite distinct professional approaches and responsibilities, should all be attempting to reach common and quite specific goals. These objectives would be reached far more effectively, argued the respondents, if different agency workers were assisted, through training, to reach a similar understanding and appreciation of the demands, and the benefits, of family participation.

Some respondents described their uncertainty over how family participation would develop in the future. As one clinical nurse manager wrote:

I feel that we are still in the very early days of this procedure and it will only come to light just how well we have been prepared as we work through it and become more familiar with the new format and gain experience in it.

Innovatory practice can always benefit from on-going evaluation and review but this is especially true of family participation given how recent and also how sensitive a development it is. It follows from this that training should be on-going and also take into account developments in the field.

A large proportion of the training received by workers consisted of the half-day conference and the one-day workshop. There was considerable overlap between respondents in these two groups, such that those individuals who received either form of training made-up possibly only 40% of all respondents.

Only a negligible number of respondents had received training with a previous employer (3%) or within their own agency as part of the pilot project (7%).

Approximately one-in-five respondents had received training with their current employer outside the pilot project, or had received some 'other' form of training. Although these proportions are relatively

large, 22% and 18% respectively, there did not appear any great uniformity in the training provided. For example, the type of training reported by the twenty-three respondents who had received 'other' training was quite diverse and included the following:

- a four day child abuse course
- writing a report
- lectures from social workers at Liverpool University
- reading reports of evaluations in other local authorities
- feedback from a senior who had attended the half-day conference
- attendance at another conference
- reading a BASW publication
- membership of the working party

Although there was considerable variation in the nature of this training, many respondents indicated that they valued the particular input they had received. While these views are quite valid, there does appear to be a need to standardise training such that different workers in the same conference are working from a similar basis.

#### 4. AGENCY WORKERS VIEWS OF FAMILY PARTICIPATION

##### General views

Respondents were asked whether they felt that the presence of a family member had had any effect upon the ability of the conference in meeting its general aims e.g. the sharing of information and making recommendations. Table 6 compares ratings from those conferences where a family member did attend, against those conferences where a family member did not attend.

**Table 6 Agency Workers Rating of the Overall Success of the Conference**

Description	Family attended conference		Family did not attend conference	
	RESPONSES		RESPONSES	
	N	%	N	%
Very high	10	10	2	10
High	43	41	9	45
Medium	38	36	6	30
Low	7	7	0	0
Very low	2	2	0	0
Missing	5	5	3	15
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>105</b>	<b>101</b>	<b>20</b>	<b>100</b>

Caution has to be exercised in interpreting data from this evaluation as the sample size (20 conferences) was relatively small. Having said this, one cannot help but be struck by the similarity in the ratings for the two types of conference. There was very little difference in the ratings of overall success of the two types of conference e.g. 87% of 'attended' conferences were rated medium to very high as against 85% of 'non-attended' conferences.

When family members were present just over one-half of all respondents said that the success rating of the conference was 'high' or 'very high'. Only 9% respondents rated the conference as 'low' or very low'. These findings suggest that the presence of a family member does not have an adverse effect on the overall success of the conference, as perceived by agency workers.



## Absence of people or information

In the next question respondents were asked whether they felt that there was any person or any information missing from the conference which was detrimental to achieving the objectives of the case conference. The data in Table 7 show that respondents were divided into two roughly equal groups according to whether or not they felt that other persons or information were needed at the conference.

**Table 7**      **Did the Respondent Feel that the Absence of Any Person or Information from the Conference was Detrimental to Achieving the Objectives of the Conference**

Description	RESPONSES	
	N	%
Yes	55	44
No	63	50
Missing	7	6
<u>TOTAL</u>	<u>125</u>	<u>100</u>

44% of responses indicated that the conference was adversely affected by the absence of some person or some information. This finding is obviously of some concern but in order to fully appreciate its meaning, and any implications for family participation, it is necessary to consider precisely which persons or information was missing. This data is contained in Table 8.

**Table 8**      **Which Person or Information was Absent and had a Detrimental Effect on the Conference**

Description	N	% (of all responses)
A family member	10	8
Another family member	14	11
Social worker	11	9
School	11	9
Police	6	5
Doctor	6	5
Nurse	3	3
Psychiatrist or psychologist	2	2
Agency from another area	2	2
Other	10	8

(based upon 55 affirmative responses)

There were three conferences where no member of the family attended and there were twenty questionnaires which referred to these conferences. In exactly one-half (N=10) of the questionnaires it was stated that the absence of a family member was detrimental to achieving the aims of the conference.

105 questionnaires were returned by respondents who attended conferences where a family member was present. In 14 (13%) of these questionnaires the respondent replied that the absence of a second family member had had a detrimental effect upon the conference i.e. at least one family member had been present but the respondent felt that the conference would have benefitted had an additional family member been present.

These findings show that at least some agency workers feel that family members can make an important contribution to case conferences.

The respondents who answered affirmatively to this question cited 51 separate instances where they felt that the absence of an agency worker or agency information had had a detrimental effect upon the conference. It proved to be impossible, in the course of the evaluation, to question workers who had declined invitations to the conference, as to the reason for their non-attendance. The data in Table 2 suggests that a large proportion of the non-attenders may have consisted of agency workers who did not normally attend case conferences. However, this does not rule out the possibility that some agency workers may have stayed away specifically because family members had been invited. This issue needs further exploration and a means of achieving this is suggested in the final section of this report.

Before leaving this question it is worth pointing out that many of the absences of workers or information which were believed to be detrimental, were agency-specific i.e. there was little agreement between workers from different professions, but who were at the same conference, as to which worker or which information was important. It appeared that respondents felt the absence of a particular person or piece of information was important when it had a more direct bearing upon their own professional role e.g. a health visitor may have felt the absence of medical data more acutely; and a family therapist would cite the absence of a psychiatric report as being detrimental.

### **Persons whose presence was detrimental**

In addition to being asked whether the absence of any person or information was detrimental towards meeting the objectives of the case conference, respondents were asked whether any person's presence was detrimental. The purpose of this question was to examine the often quoted concern that the presence of a family member might have a negative effect on the conference. Table 9 compares responses from the conferences where a family member was present against those where one was not.

**Table 9****Did any Person's Presence have a Detrimental Effect on Achieving the Aims of the Conference**

	Family member present		Family member not present	
	RESPONSES		RESPONSES	
	N	%	N	%
Detrimental effect	21	20	0	0
No detrimental effect	79	76	17	90
Missing	5	4	3	10
<u>TOTAL</u>	<u>105</u>	<u>100</u>	<u>20</u>	<u>100</u>

It is quite clear that in those conferences where a family member was present it was more likely that some person's presence would be cited as having a negative effect. However, as Table 10 shows, respondents did not always believe that it was the family member's presence which was responsible for the problem. Although family members were the largest single group, agency workers as a whole, were cited more often. This does not alter the concerns of those respondents who mentioned the detrimental effect of family members, but it does help put it into perspective.

**Table 10****Which Person's Presence was Detrimental to Achieving the Aims of the Conference**

	RESPONSES	
Description	N	%
A family member	9	43
Student/observer	4	19
Police	4	19
School	1	5
Agency from another area	1	5
Other	1	5
Missing	1	5
<u>TOTAL</u>	<u>21</u>	<u>101*</u>

(\* does not equal 100 because of rounding)

Given that 105 questionnaires were completed for the 17 conferences where a family member was present, it is noteworthy that only 9 (9%) of these indicated that the presence of a family member had had a negative effect in terms of meeting the objectives of the case conference.

When a respondent stated that some person's presence was detrimental - whether family member or agency worker - it was usually not because of any specific problem or incident, but because of a particular family member - agency worker relationship or interaction. This is illustrated by the following quotes:

A Headteacher wrote:

I believe my presence caused \_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_ unnecessary embarrassment.

A recorder wrote:

Student nurse - I appreciate they attend conferences to observe, but I felt it would have been better to attend a less contentious conference. Mother was questioning why she was in attendance.

Occasionally specific difficulties did arise as a result of the presence of a particular person in the conference. As another Headteacher noted:

Grandmother - although offering support to the children's mother, I felt she did all the talking and thereby affected the input by the children's mother.

The identification of students or observers as persons whose presence was detrimental identified a special problem. Parents may have found the presence of a student more difficult to accept because it could not be justified on the grounds of their child's welfare and protection, and also because it created a sense that they were, in some way, being studied. Exactly what family members said about the presence of observers and students is dealt with in a later section of this report. Suffice to say at this point, the presence of students or observers does raise special difficulties in terms of family participation.

The attendance of particular agency workers was sometimes cited as a problem. Very often this was due to the family's feelings towards the agency e.g. a family member felt intimidated by the presence of the police, or embarrassed by a teacher being there, or perplexed as to why a social worker from their former local authority was in attendance.

In a small number of instances, it appeared that the behaviour of the agency worker rather than his/her presence was the problem. Overall, however, individual agency workers did not present many obstacles to family participation. Many of the problems which did arise could have been overcome had family members been given explicit reasons as to why certain agency workers were in attendance.

## **The effect of family participation upon the general operation of the case conference**

The data in Table 11 show that a sizeable proportion of the responses pointed to parental participation as having had some effect upon the general operation of the conference.

**Table 11**      **Did the Presence of a Family Member have an Effect on the General Operation of the Conference**

Description	RESPONSES	
	N	%
Yes	55	52
No	45	43
Missing	5	5
<u>TOTAL</u>	<u>105</u>	<u>100</u>

The 55 questionnaires which contained affirmative replies to this question, identified a total of 65 effects. The frequency with which different effects were cited is given in Table 12.

**Table 12**      **The Type of Effect which Family Participation was Reported to have had upon the Operation of the Conference**

Description	N	%
Inhibited discussion	11	17
Interrupted flow of conference	8	12
Longer duration	12	18
Shorter duration	6	9
Positive effect - not specified	11	17
Improved discussion	4	6
Other	13	20
<u>TOTAL</u>	<u>65</u>	<u>99*</u>

(\* does not equal 100 because of rounding)

Some of the effects identified by respondents were clearly negative e.g. those listed under the category 'interruption in the flow of the conference' (12%). This particular effect was sometimes the consequence of a family member having become upset, or needing technical terms explained to him/her, or because s/he had learning difficulties which made it difficult to follow conference procedures.

A slightly larger group of responses (17%) claimed that discussion had been inhibited by family participation. This was largely a case of agency workers who felt greater unease at expressing their views or in relaying factual matters, especially if this concerned sensitive topics.

Conversely, some responses (6%) suggested that the quality of the discussion in the conference had been improved through the presence of a family member. A further 17% of responses indicated that the effects of family participation were positive, although the respondent did not specify in what way.

The single most frequently cited effect (27%) was upon the duration of the conference - whether increased or decreased. Determining the significance of this particular effect is not straightforward. Sometimes conferences took longer because matters had to be explained to the family. This might have interrupted the flow of the conference but it should also have led to greater participation by the family member and possible greater commitment to the child protection plan. Alternatively, a family member may have been interrupting the conference in a non-constructive manner thereby leading to less acceptable forms of delay.

Interpreting the meaning of shorter conferences was equally difficult. Sometimes the chairperson speeded-up the conference in order to alleviate stress upon family members. While this action may have been quite understandable, some respondents argued that it meant the conference did not adequately discuss the concerns for which it had been convened.

It is possible that some agency workers perceptions of 'effects' was dependent not only on the conference they attended but also their general attitude to 'participation'. However, some workers were quite confident that family participation had had specific effects on the conference:

Recorder

Conference lasted longer than it would usually. Maternal grandfather kept interrupting, affecting the flow of the conference.

Hospital social worker

I do think that the presence of this family member led to reluctance to discuss failure of previous child care, and the reliability of the client to keep to agreements. Everything seemed to be accepted at face value.

Recorder

The mother and maternal grandmother were present and were able to more fully explain the feelings and problems within the family. Their presence did not affect the duration or running of the conference in my opinion.

Social worker

Needed time to explain things to mum so that, maybe, it took longer than it otherwise might have done.

Social worker

Probably prolonged the conference since people were anxious to explain carefully their viewpoint and avoid raising further anxieties in the mother. On balance a better conference for parental participation.

Social worker

I felt the conference was dealt with more quickly and efficiently owing to the presence of family members. Communication was kept to a minimum between professionals dealing only with facts.

School nurse

Mother and daughter upset, any discussion stopped to wind up conference as quickly as possible for their sakes.

The next quotes referred to issues which were listed in the 'other' category of Table 12. While these comments tended not to refer to a specific effect, the respondents did feel that it was necessary to make some statement concerning the interaction between the conference and the family member.

Valuable - helped mum appreciate the seriousness of agency's concern.

Benefit, because school contacts with Mr \_\_\_\_\_ begun, and he is now more happy to come to the school. Running and duration not affected.

The chairperson was over sensitive as the parent was present and I felt the approach was 'softly, softly'. Everyone was bending over backwards not to offend the young mother who was very upset. In effect, I felt the presence was manipulative in the way the conference went.

In two conferences the police left the meeting after having made their submission. This was due to fears that their presence, in the company of persons who were due to give evidence in pending

criminal trials, could prejudice those legal proceedings. As there were only 17 conferences where family members were present, this is a relatively high rate. Therefore, it may be that in as many as 10-15% of conferences the police may have to leave after presenting their information. Should any on-going monitoring be installed then it would be possible to detect whether this problem diminishes over time or increases, in which case it may be necessary to consider modifications in the practice of family participation.

### **The effect of the family members' presence upon respondents behaviour**

A significant minority of respondents said that the presence of a member of the family in the conference had had some influence upon their behaviour, although approximately twice as many respondents thought that the presence of a family member had had no such effect. As the recorders did not have any involvement with the family their replies to this question are, regarded as 'not applicable' in Table 13.

**Table 13**      **Did the Presence of a Family Member have any Effect Upon your Behaviour at the Conference**

Description	RESPONSES	
	N	%
Yes	33	31
No	55	52
N/A	17	16
<u>TOTAL</u>	<u>105</u>	<u>99*</u>

(\* does not equal 100 because of rounding)

The 33 affirmative responses to this question identified a total of 38 instances where an agency worker's behaviour had been affected. The types of effect are listed in Table 14. It is clear from this data that a significant proportion of the effects were negative and some of these could be thought to be quite serious. While 'speaking less' might not necessarily be indicative of a serious problem, it is possible that those persons who withheld opinions (N=9) may have deprived the conference of some important input. Of even greater concern are the three persons who withheld specific information from the conference.



Naturally, the importance of these particular effects is dependent upon the precise nature of the information which was withheld. As they stand these results do show that the presence of a family member may have quite a significant effect upon the behaviour of agency workers, although the numbers involved may be relatively small.

**Table 14      Type of Effect Family Members Presence had upon Respondents' Behaviour**

Description	RESPONSES	
	N	% (of 105)
Spoke less in general	10	10
Withheld opinions	9	3
Withheld specific information	3	3
Spoke with more clarity or used less technical language	5	5
Other	11	10

Some of the comments respondents made in connection with this question are as follows:

**Headteacher**

I spoke less; I did not speak as fully about the girls flirtatious behaviour in school as this could be seen as opinion although it had been regularly noted.

**Police officer**

Withheld opinion; withheld specific information; spoke less.

**Police Youth Liaison Officer**

I feel all agencies in attendance are aware that some aspects of information may be either distressing or subject to disagreement between parent / agencies and consequently people are less likely to make an opinion.

**Family Therapist**

Withheld level of my concern re. mother's voices telling her to kill herself. Also withheld issue of how far incidents of throwing and hitting were reality. (This was alluded to but not openly discussed.) In retrospect both these issues could have been discussed appropriately in such a large group, particularly if there had been more time. At the time it seemed too difficult to find the right way to do it.

Hospital Social Worker

Clarified what I said, focussed attention on issues.

Social Worker

Made no difference, save for not using social work jargon.

Chairperson

I attempted to clarify things for the parent which I would not normally have done.

Health Visitor

None, but probably expressed opinion less forcefully.

Police Officer

Made greater distinction between fact and opinion.

The respondents who felt that the family's presence had had no effect upon their behaviour also made a number of interesting comments:

Senior Social Worker

None at all. I personally welcomed the presence of the family as this corresponds to my own philosophy.

Social Worker

None - mum knew what I'd say beforehand. I'd given her, and explained to her, my report.

Chairperson

I was far nicer.

### **Effect which the presence of a family member had upon respondents' attitudes**

Almost twice as many respondents felt that their attitudes had been influenced by the family members presence, compared to those who thought their behaviour had been affected. This data is given in Table 15.

**Table 15**      **Did Family Participation have any Effect Upon Respondent's Attitudes**

RESPONSES		
Description	N	%
Yes	58	55
No	40	38
Missing	7	7
TOTAL	105	100

It might be that attitudinal effects were less significant for the outcome of the conference than were behavioural ones. What was clear is that it was more difficult to assess the impact on the conference of changes in a respondent's attitude. The types of effects given in Table 16 suggest that some agency workers may have altered their assessment of the family situation as a result of the family being present at the conference. This impression is reinforced by comments which respondents added to their questionnaire. Examples of these are given on the following page.

A breakdown of the ways in which agency workers attitudes were affected is given in Table 16.

**Table 16**      **How Agency Workers Attitudes to the Family Changed as a Result of Family Participation**

RESPONSES		
Description	N	% (of 105)
More sympathetic	31	30
Less sympathetic	6	6
More anxious	10	10
Less anxious	2	2
Other	16	15

The most common response was for the agency worker to say that they had become more sympathetic towards the family (N=31). Often this was because they had acquired a better understanding of the problems e.g. child care, housing and financial, which the family faced. Sometimes, although considerably less often, the agency worker became less sympathetic towards the family (N=6). One worker, for example, said that the parent had used her own distress to manipulate the conference.

Twelve respondents said their attitudes had changed in ways which could be construed to have had

a more direct bearing upon their assessment of the family and its problems e.g. the ten respondents who said they had greater anxieties concerning the family having seen its members at the conference.

Some of the comments respondents made with reference to this question are given below:

Chairperson

I think I was more sympathetic. On paper the mother sounded culpable. In person her limitations were more evident.

School Nurse

Sympathy for mother who was going to have to believe her husband or daughter.

Clinical Medical Officer

The conference was obviously distressing for the mother and I felt greater sympathy for her.

Recorder

Lesser sympathy, I did not feel as if parent was being totally honest and was holding back information.

Chairperson

Greater anxiety that parent and grandparent would use information to evade professionals.

Chairperson

Very anxious. Overwhelmingly sad.

Social Worker

I felt sympathetic towards Mr \_\_\_\_\_ but also frustrated. I felt he was agreeing to everything for fear of losing control of his children.

Headteacher

An understanding and sympathy of her (mother) needs as an adult; a deeper awareness of her isolation and possibly closer relationship to her daughter. More awareness of her needs as a parent.

Social Worker

I felt slightly more anxious about having the child present - rather than the mother - because she had to listen to the details of the abuse again.

Not known prior to case conference but I felt I could work with mother to good effect. Otherwise conference had no great effect on my feelings.

Dep.Dist.Person.Serv.Off.

I was concerned to have conference move away from focus on injury and more towards providing help.

### **The effect of family participation upon the behaviour and attitude of other agency workers**

It is obviously more difficult for a person to reliably report on another person's reaction to a situation than it is their own. However, it was felt to be important to ask respondents about their perceptions of their colleagues behaviour and attitude in the conference. The conference was a collective exercise and agency workers may have been influenced by one another's reactions.

As the data in Table 17 show, approximately one-third of all respondents felt that either the behaviour or the attitude of other agency workers had been affected by family participation in the conference. As discussed above, one-third of respondents thought that their own behaviour had been affected, and just over one-half of respondents said this of their attitude.

On the basis of these latter figures one would have expected higher rates amongst the 'peer ratings'. This under-reporting may be a reflection of the difficulty in detecting effects in other people.

**Table 17**      **Did family participation have any effect upon the behaviour or attitude of other agency workers**

Description	RESPONSES	
	N	%
Yes	36	34
No	62	59
Missing	7	7
<u>TOTAL</u>	<u>105</u>	<u>100</u>

Individuals might not only have been unaware of the reactions of their colleagues but they may, conversely, have imagined effects which did not occur. Despite these methodological problems

answers to this question did give some insight into agency - interactions within the conference. Table 18 shows that the effects which respondents identified in their colleagues were very similar to those which they had reported for themselves.

**Table 18**      **The Type of Effect Which Family Participation had upon the Behaviour or the Attitude of Other Agency Workers**

Description	RESPONSES	
	N	% (of 105)
Less discussion of factual matters	8	8
Gave less opinion	8	8
Felt uncomfortable	4	4
Greater understanding of case	1	1
Positive effect - not specified	1	1
Other	12	11
Not specified	2	2

Not surprisingly perhaps, respondents were far more likely to identify behavioural rather than attitudinal effects. Overall, the suggestion made by some respondents was that in a small number of conferences, either individual workers made less comment, or the conference as a whole engaged in less discussion, as a result of a family member being present. However, each of these effects was cited by less than one-in-ten respondents.

### **The effect of family participation upon the family**

The reaction of agency workers to family participation was somewhat mixed: large numbers reported no effect; others identified significant benefits, and the remainder described rather adverse consequences. In contrast, the reaction of family members to participation - as reported by agency workers -was far more consistent.

A very large majority of respondents believed that family members found participation to be a quite traumatic experience. This is not to say that respondents felt that family members had not contributed to the conference, nor that they had not valued the opportunity to be present. However, the answers to this question constituted some of the most powerful statements concerning the practice of family participation, and the clear message was that preparation for parents, and appropriate and adequate attention to their needs within the conference, are essential.

Respondents were asked to describe how family members felt during the conference. Their comments were categorised according to the following scheme: negative comments only (46 respondents); positive and negative comments (37 respondents), and positive comments only (9 respondents). There were comments in a further 13 questionnaires which could not be classified according to this scheme.

Even these figures understate the extent to which respondents felt the conference was a difficult experience for family members. In the 'positive only' category, for example, the comments did not have the same intensity as those in the 'negative only' category. Similarly, in the 'intermediate' category, the negative comments tended to be more prominent than the positive ones.

In short, a large proportion of family members found the case conference deeply disturbing. This was not because of any particular feature or weakness of the conference but was due to the very act of being subject to, and being 'processed' by, the case conference.

The following lists give all the different comments which were made in the three categories described above ('negative only', 'negative and positive', 'positive' only). These quotes are a powerful testimony to the strength of family members emotional reaction at being present in the conference.

#### **Negative only (N=46)**

Felt threatened and because of this were defensive in all their viewpoints....

Difficult experience. Feeling she had no power, no control, that it was all taken out of her hands....

Over-emotional....

Parent got upset....

Traumatic....

Traumatic and overwhelming since mother's mental state was already a major contributing factor in the problems....

Difficult, stressful, nervous about contributing....

Annoyed at discussion of her family by strangers....

Embarrassment by child....

Anxious and overwhelmed....

Mother was very anxious and contributed little. Grandmother was also reticent but slightly less nervous....

Too anxious to actually contribute....

Traumatic, overwhelmed, too anxious to contribute. The family member stated afterwards that she didn't understand what people had said....

Some anxiety....

Overwhelmed, unsure, threatened by numbers of people listening....

At one stage upset. At another stage non-committal....

I suspect a bit overwhelmed and vulnerable....

Totally distraught....

Mum cried - very upset. Very anxious - decisions went over her head. Too anxious to contribute and would have adopted any suggestions made. Of no value to conference....

I felt that the mother and her son were anxious, afraid, unsure at what was going to happen. However, accepted everything. No anger....

Extremely nervous....

Traumatic and tearful....

The child obviously found it traumatic and overwhelming and was visibly upset. The parent did eventually contribute to the case conference even though she appeared anxious and then broke down....

Bemused and anxious....

Overwhelmed....

Angry at delay. Confused by non-attendance of....

#### **Negative and Positive (N=37)**

Embarrassed, stressed but not overwhelmingly. Both family members were particularly in control and contributed well and openly to the conference.

Traumatic but both took part....

Mother appeared defensive and was willing to contribute to conversation. The victim played down the allegations but did not get upset at all....

Father and daughter needed to protect themselves as individuals. This was shown in contradictions and argument. The father was anxious but seemed to enjoy the attention....

A difficult but valued experience. Mother did cry at the conference but was able to contribute



helpfully....

Very anxious. Found it difficult but also a valuable experience because she saw that there were no hidden agendas....

One partner contributed quite vocally but there was some anxiety present. Not keen to have people interfering....

Difficult but valued experience - able to hear concerns, able to participate and understand plans etc....

A difficult task but contributing as best she could....

Mother very distressed but still valued attendance....

Traumatic but in the end really a satisfactory conclusion from mother's point of view. Daughter said little but it appeared to be an ordeal for her....

In this instance client appeared anxious and eager to please. (her social worker or conference?). Appeared to take information calmly even when thought she might be upset....

They played a valuable part in giving information but obviously found it distressing....

Anxious but grateful on being there....

Contributed well to the conference, both nervous/anxious but acquitted themselves reasonably well....

Nervous but not overwhelmed....

Very nervous but valued. Able to express emotions and explain situations. Relieved at outcome....

Difficult experience initially but seemed to relax after short period of time. Seemed surprised, on discussions later, that it had been fairly informal and open....

#### **Positive only (N=9)**

A good opportunity to make points....

A valued contribution....

Valued being able to speak. Was supported by hospital staff....

Parents seemed to be relaxed....

Able to contribute. Had a good knowledge of social services etc....

No effect. Contributed fully....

Mum and gran seemed to participate well and their opinions were sought and listened to. I would

think they might have felt shy and anxious initially but their contributions were valuable and I think they would have appreciated this....

For most family members the conference environment, individual agency workers and conference procedures were wholly alien. On top of this parents may have been frightened that they would lose their child. Some parents may have been feeling very guilty over recent events. Overall, family members were very disadvantaged in coming to the conference. The remarks of agency workers describe the consequences of this situation very well.

### **Problems encountered by family members at the conference**

Agency workers were asked to report upon problems which family members themselves had had regarding 'participation'. From their responses it seemed that a significant proportion of family members experienced problems. Table 19 shows that 44% of all responses said that a family member had experienced a problem. It would appear then, from this finding, at least, that family participation probably presented a considerably greater challenge to the family than it did to agency workers.

**Table 19**      **Did Family Members Experience any Specific Problems Within the Conference?**

Description	N	%
Yes	46	44
No	51	49
Missing	8	8
<hr/> TOTAL	<hr/> 105	<hr/> 101*

(\* does not equal 100 because of rounding)

Respondents identified a total of 66 instances where family members faced problems. A breakdown of these is given in Table 20. The type of problems reported were quite varied. Some could be said to be more a function of the case conference: for example, some family members felt intimidated by the number of people present. Other problems were more family-specific e.g. where family members had difficulty in understanding technical terms or conference procedures. These difficulties were more likely to occur, and tended to be more acute, if the family member had a learning difficulty. Occasionally a family member experienced stress as a result of antipathy which existed between the family member and a particular agency worker.

**Table 20      The Type of Problems Family Members Experienced Within the Conference**

Description	N	%
Understanding technical terms	15	14
The number of people present	17	16
Reaction to particular agencies or individuals who were present	9	9
Disagreement with information submitted to the conference	3	3
Other	22	21

In addition to investigating whether family members experienced problems within the conference, the current evaluation also set out to discover whether family members had had problems in actually coming to the conference e.g. difficulties in obtaining childcare, the inaccessibility of the venue, and pressure from another family member not to attend.

Agency workers' responses suggested that family members experienced such problems relatively infrequently. Table 21 shows that problems were indicated in only 14 (13%) of all responses received.

**Table 21      Did Family Members Experience any Problems in Being Able to Attend the Conference**

Description	Responses	
	N	%
Yes	14	13
No	85	81
Missing	6	6
<u>TOTAL</u>	<u>105</u>	<u>100</u>

Table 22 lists the type of practical problems which agency workers said family members had to contend with. Again a range of problems were reported. One of the responses in the 'other' category referred to a father who did not attend the conference because there was a warrant out for his arrest. Had he attended then he would, in all likelihood, have been arrested.

**Table 22      The Type of Problems Encountered by Family Members in Attending the Conference**

Description	Responses	
	N	% (of 105 responses)
Finding the conference venue	3	3
Domestic tension	4	4
Travel to the conference	5	5
Other	6	6

It is reassuring, perhaps, that practical problems were not reported at a high rate, and those that were reported would generally not be too difficult to overcome. However, this does not mean this issue can be minimised or ignored. Some of the problems reported by agency workers could easily have led to non-attendance by the family member. Furthermore, some agency workers may simply have been unaware of the practical problems which confronted family members, so these figures may be an underestimate.

### **Preparation for participation**

Agency workers were asked to rate how well prepared family members were to participate in the conference. A question of this sort inevitably involves a degree of subjective assessment. In spite of this, it was considered important to obtain agency workers views, as they were in a position to observe family members and their perception might have constituted an important factor in agency worker-family interaction.

Respondents were asked to rate preparation on a five-point scale from 'very well' to 'very poor'. Table 23 suggests that in general agency workers felt that family members were quite well prepared. Almost three-quarters (73%) of all responses indicated that the family members were at least 'moderately' well prepared, and just under one-half (43%) of all responses pointed to family members as being 'well' or 'very well' prepared. Given that the family participation being evaluated in this study was part of a pilot exercise, with agency workers having having had little experience of preparing family members for initial conferences, these results are very positive. At the same time, one should not lose sight of the fact that 15% of responses were in the 'poor' or 'very poor' category.

**Table 23**      **Respondents' Ratings of How Well Prepared the Family was for the Conference**

Description	Responses	
	N	%
Very well	10	10
Well	35	33
Moderately	31	30
Poorly	12	11
Very Poorly	4	4
Missing	13	12
<u>TOTAL</u>	<u>105</u>	<u>100</u>

These results indicate that respondents felt family members were, in general, quite well prepared. More than 2 in 5 respondents thought the family members in their conference were 'well' or 'very well' prepared. If 'moderately well prepared' responses are included then the proportion rises to almost three-quarters of all respondents. The proportion of respondents who felt that the family's preparation was quite inadequate is small but obviously any replies of the 'poor' or 'very poor' variety are a cause for concern. As in other areas, these question suggest that 'Liverpool' may be doing much of what it does well, but there may also be room for improvement, as in this instance regarding the preparation of family members.

### **Level of participation**

Agency workers' ratings of the degree to which family members participated in the case conference produced findings as positive as those for 'preparation' (Table 24). 68% of all responses (N=72) assessed family participation as being between 'moderate' and 'very high', although almost one-half of these responses (N=31) put participation at only a moderate level. This category may have included both satisfactory and unsatisfactory degrees of participation. There were 23 responses in the 'low' and 'very low' categories. Given that this was a pilot exercise, there were bound to be some shortcomings. With further experience and training it should be possible to obtain a significant improvement in levels of participation.

**Table 24      Respondents' Ratings of Family Member's Participation in the Conference**

Description	N	%
Very high level of participation	5	5
High level of participation	34	32
Moderate level of participation	33	31
Low level of participation	17	16
Very low level of participation	6	6
Missing	10	10
<u>TOTAL</u>	<u>105</u>	<u>100</u>

The data in Table 24 represent a major part of this evaluation. While agencies may adopt 'participation' as a key principle of the child protection system, unless it works in practice it means very little. On the basis of the agency worker's ratings, it did appear that family members were usually able to participate in quite a meaningful way. This was in spite of the challenges which participation inevitably presents, and the relatively small amount of experience and training which agency workers had had.

More than one-fifth of all responses rated participation to have been at 'low' or 'very low level'. It is possible that a majority of these replies referred to conferences where a family member had a learning difficulty or was under considerable emotional strain. Naturally, these obstacles to participation cannot be ignored but given that many of the low ratings may have referred to individuals in groups such as these, participation levels for family members who do not face such disadvantages may be significantly higher.

Finally, it is worth mentioning that although the ratings of 'preparation' were slightly higher than those for 'participation', it is possible to have more confidence in the latter ratings as they are based more upon actual observation, whereas the ratings for preparation relied more upon subjective judgements.

### **Subsequent agency worker - family relationships**

Owing to the sensitive and stressful nature of the conference, and the fact that most parents would have had relatively little idea of what to expect, it was considered important to investigate whether the experience of 'participation' had had any adverse effect upon the relationship between any agency worker and the family in the post-conference period.

The vast majority of workers said that they had not experienced any adverse repercussions (Table 24). In fact, only 3 respondents recorded an adverse effect, and 5 respondents actually reported a definite improvement in their relationship with the family (although it must be said that the question was not specifically designed to identify positive effects).

**Table 25**      **Did the Presence of a Family Member at the Conference have any Effect Upon your On-going Relationship with the Family?**

Description	N	%
No	65	62
Yes: an adverse effect	3	3
Yes: a positive effect	5	5
Missing/N.A.	32	30
<u>TOTAL</u>	<u>105</u>	<u>100</u>

It is probable that a significant number of respondents did not record any adverse consequences, largely owing to the fact that they generally had very little contact or relationship with the family, and may well not have seen them since the conference. So the proportion of 'no' replies is a little misleading. (The replies by recorders are entered under 'not applicable' category, as they had no formal relationship with the family.) However, as only three respondents noted a deterioration in their relationship with the family it does appear that family participation in conferences caused relatively few longer-term problems.

Conversely, when agency workers did encounter problems with family members, as a consequence of participation, they tended to be quite serious:

Deputy Headteacher

Yes. My relationship with the child, which I had worked at for several months and prior to conference had been good, has been badly damaged. The pupil and the parent felt that I was hostile, which couldn't have been further from the truth - they felt that I hadn't informed them about procedures.

Headteacher

I feel my relationship with mother has deteriorated, to my regret, as the school dealt with the children far more than any other agency.

#### Headteacher

The daughter is experiencing problems in school and her resentful attitude to me suggests this stems from the meeting and me calling it. Parent is anxious about gossip - this may stem from daughter's report to her.

These comments raise both agency-specific and more general concerns. Each of the three respondents who reported adverse consequences were members of the teaching profession. (They had attended three separate conference.) It is unlikely that this was coincidental. As the second respondent noted, schools usually have considerably more contact with the child than any other agency. Associated with this, is the fact that schools are seen as more a part of the community than other agencies. This leads to a special relationship between a family and a school, one which may not sit very well with the demands of a case conference. Families might well see any involvement by school staff in the conference as a betrayal of a presumed trust or 'confidence'.

The comments quoted above seem to indicate quite clearly that schools are in a particularly sensitive situation with regards to child protection matters. It may be that particular attention has to be given to the position of teaching staff in the development of family participation.

The experiences of the above teachers reveals that different agencies may have quite different experiences of family participation. It may be that teaching staff are more likely to be the target of a child's or a parent's disquiet, following events in the case conference. In other parts of this report there are comments concerning the unique position of the police e.g. that family members may find their presence at the conference particularly intimidating and difficult to accept. Therefore, in developing the practice of family participation adequate attention must be given to agency-specific issues.

As shown in Table 25 some respondents said that their relationship with the family had positively benefited, in the longer-term, as a result of the latter's attendance at the conference. In order to maintain a sense of balance on this issue, it is worth closing this issue with quotes from some of the agency workers concerned.

#### Social Worker

Yes. Much more positive. Trust being an issue, they saw I was as good as my word i.e. we wouldn't remove child at birth which was main anxiety.

#### Senior Social Worker

A positive effect. Since I am not in day-to-day contact with the mother and this gave her and me the opportunity to meet and talk both during and following the case conference.



Improved because the mother began to co-operate and take us seriously.

## Recommendations for improving family participation

At the end of the questionnaire agency workers were asked for their suggestions as to how the practice of family participation could be improved. Judging by the number of persons who responded to this question and the detail of their replies, the large majority of agency workers have thought a great deal about the subject of participation.

Almost two-thirds (63%) of all respondents made at least one recommendation. A breakdown of their responses is given in Table 26. By far the most common recommendation, was for an increase in the quantity or the quality, of training for agency workers or preparation for family members.

**Table 26**      **Recommendations Made by Agency Workers**

Description	N	% (of 125 responses)
Better preparation of parents	30	24
More preparation of parents	9	7
More training for agency workers	29	23
Better training	3	2
Change format of case conference	22	18
Improve venue or facilities	12	10
Reduce numbers (of agency workers) at conference	5	4
Change agency composition of conference	6	5
Other	37	30

The following comments are a selection of those which agency workers made concerning the topics of training and preparation:

#### Court Welfare Officer

It would perhaps be useful to be able to provide parents with written information and guidelines concerning the process and make-up of the conference and their legal rights when involved.

#### Education Welfare Officer

I would certainly approve the need for training, as I myself have received none.

#### Health Visitor

On-going training programmes for staff from relevant agencies so that there is a better understanding of the respective roles of other agencies to promote good working relationships.

#### Health Visitor

Better preparation for parents - explanation of all the people that will be present and their various roles.

#### Nurse Manager

I feel that all issues must be spoken through with the parents, and stressing to them that all factors can and will be discussed at the case conference. This I feel will help in two ways: 1) The agencies can discuss openly matters that could have a significant bearing on the direction or the way forward; 2) The parents would not be faced with a situation where they felt a confidence had been broken.

The second largest group of recommendations, cited by 18% of all respondents, were concerned with the format of the case conference. The specific points made by agency workers on this issue were somewhat varied, but in essence the vast majority stated that either the structure or the procedures of the conference were unhelpful to the practice of family participation. The formality of proceedings, the number of people present, the lack of briefings or introductions, the absence of breaks, the use of technical language and the impersonal atmosphere, were just some of the criticisms which were levelled at the conference format. It is not, perhaps, very surprising that a forum, which for years had been developed around the needs of agency workers, was not perceived to be 'family-friendly'. This problem must be tackled if the practice of family participation is to be improved. A selection of comments from agency workers on this subject are given below:

#### Teacher

Parents and family should not be allowed to sit in a group away from the other agencies as this isolates them.

Headteacher

Change procedures and environment - less intimidating. Possibility of 'time-out' periods so that parents can privately check out language/procedures with support person...Make situation less formal - too many people sitting around in a circle - very cold atmosphere...

Social Worker

Deliberate efforts to involve parents and put them at ease.

Chairperson

Conferences should be more formalized and the parents contribution should be facilitated and encouraged by the Chair.

Social Worker

No social work jargon. Parents are intimidated by 'jargon'.

Social Worker

If the format of the conference is to remain in as formal a basis as it is at present, then a representative (professional status) should be available for parents who feel vulnerable in the case conference situation.

Health Visitor

Parents need to be well prepared and considered well prior to conference commencing i.e. brought into room first/positioning/adequate explanations.

Chairperson

Alteration to format - allow child to come in alone at some point.

The third largest group of recommendations concerned the venue or other facilities/resources which were available for the purposes family participation. Twelve respondents (10%) believed these to be inadequate. Although these complaints were voiced by a relatively small proportion of respondents, their significance should not be underestimated. As was discussed earlier, mere adherence to the principle of family participation is not enough. Concerted efforts must be made before, during and after the conference, to ensure that the family has been given every opportunity to participate. This requires more investment in 'preparation' plus alterations in the format of the conference, but one should not lose sight of the need to properly resource family participation e.g. pleasant and informal venues, child care facilities and hospitality on arrival. If these more basic needs are not met, then it may be that families are inhibited or prohibited from either attending or participating. In addition

to being of practical value the provision of these types of resources send a clear message to family members that agencies are truly committed and genuinely concerned about participation.

Some of the deficiencies agency workers identified in terms of the venue or facilities are illustrated by the following comments:

#### Health Visitor

A more 'informal' setting available as some parents may be daunted by large 'conference tables'...Also appropriate facilities for care of children i.e. toys etc. if children have to be brought as well...Rooms warm with good lighting and friendly atmosphere.

#### Community Midwife

Improved venues should be considered. This particular venue was difficult to find, the room was unavailable when participants arrived. Surroundings miserable and cold.

#### Community Midwife

The place of conference should be in pleasant surroundings, these surroundings left a lot to be desired.

#### Deputy District Officer (SSD)

Better waiting (pre-conference) facilities for parents and facilities to care for children during their attendance.

#### Headteacher

The 'office' is threatening in some situations - even sitting in a conference room is stressful for the inexperienced.

As Table 26 shows there were a small group of respondents who felt that the number of agency workers at the conference should be reduced. In practice it may be difficult to reduce the number of agency workers at the conference. It may be that the conference can only formally introduce all agency workers, explain their presence, and then apologise if family members find their numbers daunting. Given the effect which the presence of high numbers of agency workers was found to have, it would appear that some thought regarding this problem is a necessity. There follows a few examples of the comments which respondents made on this subject:

#### Social Worker

There did not seem to be any need for two police officers and two representatives from the younger brother's school. The sheer number of people at the case conference appears to be very intimidating for parents...People put their names on a sheet but were not formally introduced, which must have been difficult for the parent.

Deputy Headteacher

I would query the number of people present, one from each agency may be sufficient.

Health Visitor

The appropriateness of the people attending the conference needs to be considered fully. Are numbers doubled unnecessarily?

Certain types of recommendation were given only once or twice. It was not feasible to create individual categories for all of these responses so they are grouped together in the 'other' category (N=37). Some of these recommendations were specific to particular agencies or conferences, or reflected the concerns of a particular worker. However, they did serve to illuminate additional important aspects of family participation, and taken together they reflect the complexity of the challenge presented by this practice. A selection of these recommendations is given below:

Police Officer

Alter format. Have one, or at the most two, trained agency workers, brief and appraise parents after the conference.

Social Worker

Parents should be actively encouraged to bring a friend/relative or representative with them.

Social Worker

There should be on-going training...I also welcome your research.

Health Visitor

Overall because the practice is new we shall have to practice constant monitoring.

Nurse Manager

In the case of alleged sexual abuse where the child attends a conference there could be a decision to monitor the number of people attending for the child's benefit e.g. no student observation.

Social Worker

If SWs have been working in partnership with parents, then nothing should be a surprise.

Senior Social Worker

Better training in this case for the Chair of the conference.

Senior Social Worker

All participants should produce a written report - not just SSDs.

Family Centre Worker

All reports should be shared with parents beforehand.

Social Worker

Quicker return of conference notes to improve post-conference discussion.

Social Worker

Other agencies (e.g. school) need a lot of help with the idea that parents are involved with their children's care.

Hospital Social Worker

Perhaps Chair to be made aware of controversial information, or situations where information is being withheld...other professionals e.g. teachers and health visitors also need training and support to be able to share controversial/detrimental information in front of parents.

District Personal Services Officer

Simple leaflet which is currently in draft form should be made available urgently.

Paediatrician

I would like to have known beforehand that parents were going to be there.

Social Worker

The paramouncy principle of child protection, compounded by the advent of the Children Act is always going to make preparation for parental participation difficult. I feel that they will often remain unprepared for the stress of facing a barrack of 'professionals' more so whilst the professionals talk above them as opposed to them. However, greater input of training for agency workers and commitment of resources to the consideration of parental attendance at initial case conferences will be a start.

## 5. FAMILIES VIEWS OF FAMILY PARTICIPATION

### Introduction

Although it was possible to conduct interviews with a relatively high proportion of families (85%), the total number of families interviewed was, in research terms, quite small (N=17). Consequently, caution has to be exercised in interpreting the results of the evaluation. Having said this, it must be noted that there were some definite trends in what family members said. These trends were indicated not only by the frequency with which particular comments were made but also by the intensity with which they were expressed. Given the small numbers of families involved, the following discussion tends to be more qualitative in nature, rather than quantitative, as this seems to be a more appropriate means of presenting the data.

Certain views were voiced by only one or two family members. A number of these are incorporated in this section because although they may have been given relatively infrequently, they still have a bearing upon 'participation', particularly so for the family(s) concerned.

For the purposes of this chapter the views of family members are discussed in four discrete parts:

1. Child protection work in general
2. The principle of family participation
3. The experience of participation
4. Post conference.

Most of this section deals with family members reports on their experience within the case conference. However, as the case conference is only a part of a much larger child protection system, it was considered important to take into account family members experiences outside the conference. Some of these experiences had a direct bearing upon participation e.g. the degree of preparation a family received from an agency worker. Other interventions would also have been relevant e.g. the extent to which family members were kept informed of agency action prior to the conference. Similarly, 'participation' could not be said to have ended when the conference closed. A number of family members had unresolved feelings about participation in particular, and the conference in general, days, if not weeks, after the conference.

### Child protection work in general

A family's attitude towards participation in initial case conferences was influenced by a number of distinct factors. One of the most significant factors was the family's experience of child protection agencies, particularly social services, prior to the conference itself. The nature and duration of this

contact varied considerably between different families: some families had had contact with social services over many years. If this had been a positive experience then they tended to approach the conference in a less anxious state. If it had been contentious then the family tended to approach the conference with suspicion and hostility. If the family had had no previous contact with the child protection system then the case conference tended to present itself as a quite traumatic ordeal.

Generally speaking, families were quite satisfied with the work of the different agencies which they had been in contact with prior to the conference. Needless to say, they did not always agree with particular actions e.g. the calling of a case conference, but they did usually understand why certain actions were being undertaken. This appeared to be an important factor in alleviating some of the anxiety which family members had towards the looming case conference. Conversely, few family members expressed quite hostile comments towards the child protection system. The following two quotes give some idea of the range of opinion which was given by different families on this issue:

Liverpool Social Services Department at Spellow Lane have been open and honest with us. They've hid nothing from me. At least they gave me a chance. I'm quite happy with them...They're doing their very, very best...they gave me a chance; I respect that.

They're more or less running our lives for us.

While this evaluation is primarily concerned with participation in the case conference, it is important to realise that this issue cannot be detached from the wider child protection system. If families are to have any chance of participating in the case conference, then they must be made to feel that they are participating, where appropriate, in all aspects of the child protection process.

### **The principle of family participation in initial case conferences**

Without exception, family members strongly supported the principle of participation. This was one of the most striking findings to have emerged from the evaluation. The family members who were interviewed identified four main reasons why they felt they should be able to attend:

1. It was the welfare of their child which was being discussed.
2. The conference was concerned about their ability as parents.
3. In order to have a say.
4. In order to obtain information.



The following quotes encapsulate each of these reasons in turn:

It's mainly about parents' kids, so they can't go behind your back and discuss it.

I was glad I could go...definitely...They were talking about me, so it was only right that I should be there.

I didn't want to be there [at first]...I thought in the end I was pleased because I would have my say, which is better for me...to prove that I wasn't not caring for her.

It's good...You can find out what's going on...it's not behind your back...You can have your say and find out what the doctors are saying.

Although families were very keen, in principle, to attend the conference and had received preparation to this end, this did not prevent them from having preconceived ideas regarding what participation really meant. Often these ideas were rather negative and tended to prevail even after the conference. One particularly prevalent and strongly held view was that agency workers had made their minds up' before the day of the conference. Following on from this, some family members felt that participation was something of an agency-inspired pretence.

To some extent this cynicism may have been due to the fact that parents were embittered at having been subject to child protection procedures. At the same time, these sentiments probably reflected a very genuine concern on the part of parents; namely, that the conference was merely a rubber-stamping exercise. It needs to be remembered that for many families the case conference was a very unfamiliar experience, one about which they knew very little. The comments below are a selection of those which families made on this subject:

I definitely think they make their minds up before they go in. Whether you like it or not, they've made their minds up. They should listen to what you have to say.

Don't do anything but put parents in their place...They ask you questions but it's a formality to them. They're just sitting through a formality.

They have all their reports in front of them. It's all done before.

In their minds they had it all written down...I felt things had been said and organised before we got there...We started getting used to people being there, but we still felt that they were on the other side.

Just a play on behalf of social services. In reality people stand on unsure ground. There's very little you can do.

The parents who expressed these critical attitudes did not necessarily view the entire process of participation in this way. Some parents expressed mixed views, pointing out some aspects they were pleased with and others which they disapproved of. In some respects participation presented parents with something of a dilemma: on the one hand they were very keen to attend, while on the other this practice was very threatening to them. This dilemma sometimes left parents with conflicting and uncertain feelings regarding the principle of participation.

### **The experience of participation**

While parents valued being invited to the conference, they usually found the actual experience very disturbing. For many it was a very unfamiliar setting; large numbers of unknown professional persons were present; critical decisions were being made, and highly sensitive topics were being discussed. The feelings that this encounter provoked were often accentuated by the fact that parents were already stressed owing to home circumstances and the build up to the conference. The following comments indicate how many family members were feeling:

It was nerve racking, really nerve racking...It was frightening...The police weren't there. If they had been that would have been it.

It was horrible...The only person I knew was Mrs M\_\_\_\_...I only got introduced to them that day.

They forget it's you whose worried. It's you and your child...I was a bag of nerves, thinking what the heck's going to happen.

I was a bit nervous...What have I done? What are all these people doing here?...I felt uneasy. I thought what have I done, am I a criminal?

A number of parents made reference, quite spontaneously, to the fact that they felt the conference was like a courtroom:

It was like a trial, it was like we were on trial...It was very official, like being in a court room, like being in court.

It's as if you're on trial.

It turned into a tribunal sort of thing...It felt like we were in the dock sort of thing.

You worry about saying anything. It's like being in court, like on trial.

These comments strongly suggest that the format of the case conference was not conducive to participation. Furthermore, it is clear from these remarks that parents were under a considerable amount of stress at the conference. On reflection, it is particularly worrying that the children who were present at the conference may have had the very same feelings.

This raises the question as to how well prepared the family was for the conference. Parent's ratings of their own preparation were difficult to evaluate as they appeared to be influenced by so many factors. In general, most parents seemed to feel that they had acquired a basic understanding of what the conference would involve.

Some aspects of the conference were not very susceptible to 'preparation' e.g. parents' emotional response. Some parents, such as those with learning difficulties, may not have been able to fully absorb the preparation they had received. 'Preparation' was obviously a complex affair but a number of parents were left feeling dissatisfied:

\_\_\_\_\_ [social worker] was trying to explain what was going to happen but I wasn't prepared...I hadn't really been to a conference before. She tried to explain it to me but she couldn't really.

I was prepared in one way but in another I wasn't because I was thinking about what kind of questions are they going to ask me.

In addition to this general sense of 'unpreparedness' a number of parents highlighted a number of specific aspects of the conference which they did not understand. Three aspects were cited with particular frequency:

1. Conference procedures e.g. the purpose of reports; the role of the chairperson and the recorder and the objectives of the conference.
2. Agency representation e.g. why particular agencies were represented and why so many people were present.
3. Post-conference procedures e.g. what registration entailed and what a case review meant.

Examples of the difficulties family members experienced, through a lack of adequate preparation, are illustrated in the following comments:

Mothers should know a bit about it before they go in. Things you can understand. People tell you about it but it is in big words you can't understand...In the conference and before it, they use big words...It [the conference] didn't bother me. I couldn't understand most of it.

It was a bit confusing...They were talking about \_\_\_\_\_ and this 'format' [the register] they had stuck her on, but I didn't know what it was all about...They said they were putting her [another child] on the [the register]. I don't know what they said it was.

Everybody couldn't have been nicer. They were ever so polite and sympathetic, not pointing a finger... The thing that worries me is that they mentioned the at-risk register and I don't know what that means... Do you have any idea...Do you know who uses it? What is it for?...I didn't know anything about the child abuse register...I don't know whether \_\_\_\_\_ [child] is on the register. They said that we would get all that [the minutes] in the post but we haven't...No one told us anything about what the review means, nothing in the conference about it.

I didn't know half the people there. The baby doctor was there, I don't know why she was there...The health visitor was there, I didn't mind that. Two social workers I knew, the other three I didn't know what they were there for.

I was expecting everything else but not the social worker who took away my other child. You're thinking he's only come to put the mockers on...You're scared...I could have said he's got to leave but I felt out of place.

I felt we were outnumbered. Everyone else around the table versus us...I think there were people there who didn't need to be...There

were two from health; one from \_\_\_\_\_ [another SSD], who we weren't under any more - she could have given a statement. As they say who they are you forget. They should have name plates. There should have been more from our side.

It would be unfair and inaccurate to think that the success of preparation was solely down to the efforts of the keyworker. Parental motivation and understanding must be key factors also. However, the lack of understanding, exhibited by some parents, of even the most basic aspects of case conferences, suggests that 'preparation' may need to be strengthened and also regularly monitored.

Before leaving the issue of preparation, it is important to point out that some parents adopted a far more laissez-faire attitude to the conference:

I didn't mind the number of people there because they're all involved.

I get nervous when there's lots of people there, but I was happy with the number of people there.

These latter comments show that different families sometimes reacted in quite different ways to the case conference. It may have been that successful preparation was very dependent upon the ability of the keyworker to identify the specific 'preparation needs' of the family s/he was responsible for.

The explanatory leaflet which parents were given as part of the preparation received a mixed reception:

I got a leaflet about different conferences...The leaflet told me what was going to happen...The leaflet didn't tell you much about it...It told you about different conferences, but I didn't know which one I was going to. It was just general information.

I saw a booklet, that was quite useful.

They briefly explained what was going to happen and they left a leaflet. They said what was in the leaflet really, but that only made things more confusing.

The leaflet was little help.

I didn't read it.

In spite of the problems described above some family members did feel that they had taken at least some part in the conference:

I felt all right. Some of them were all right. They never spoke to me nasty. They gave me that chance. I did take a part in it...All I was doing was answering questions, but I did feel I took a part in it...I would have liked it if they could have said 'could Mrs \_\_\_\_\_ explain what happened beforehand' [leading up to the physical punishment]. I didn't know whether they had any notes in front of them.

...Allowed to say what you feel and that...I thought it would be a quick thing, but it wasn't. They took their time. I was really made up about that. I thought I was involved. They listened to what I said.

They go around the table. Everyone says their bit. They left me to last. I didn't mind being left 'til last. I listened to what they had to say, then I said what I had to say. I prefer it that way.

Other parents did not feel that they had really participated:

I was glad I was there, but I couldn't say anything because of my nerves of talking in front of people.

I just didn't like the way they were explaining to my mum and dad and not explaining to me. I didn't really take part. They just asked me 'is that OK with you?'.

It's like a pressure on your head. You have to make agreements because there's no orders. I said I'll go here this week and this place next week. You feel under pressure because you worry what they're going to do if you don't agree.

A number of family members implied that their ability to participate changed over the course of the conference:

I was a bit nervous at first, but they were friendly and I wasn't so nervous after a bit.

It was scary at first, until you get used to it, after about 10 or 15 minutes.

I wasn't so nervous when it finished, but I was when it started.

This is an encouraging finding as it suggests that, as the conference progressed agency workers, were able to generate an atmosphere which was more conducive to participation. These comments also raise questions as to when family members should be invited to speak. As with so many other issues though, there were, contrary views. One family member remarked:

It got worse because they were all talking. It was too much for me. I wouldn't like to go through it again.

Some parents expressed a preference to speak at the end of the conference, while other parents preferred to speak earlier on. In the case of the parent who made the last quote, it might have been far more suitable if she had been invited to speak at the beginning. This particular issue illustrates very well the danger of generalising about family participation. One of the points which agency workers will need to keep in mind continually is that participation must be tailored to the individual family.

A number of parents complained about questions which were asked, or information which was given, in the conference. Invariably, the question or information, related to quite sensitive topics but what particularly aggrieved family members was that they had had no forewarning:

They know everything - it's funny...you think they don't but then they hit you with it.

When we went there they gave out a statement that we hadn't seen before we got there. There were some things on there that came out of the blue that we didn't have an answer for.

They said in the conference - the Chairperson - that we had no criminal record... What if we had had criminal records and my mum was there...Just a few minutes before it started they told me I might have to swear an oath, that took me by surprise.

It may have been that most of these situations were unavoidable. However, in some cases they may have been a product of inadequate preparation by the agency worker. Even if the parents could not have been given notice of sensitive questions or information which was to be raised in the conference, they could at least have been alerted to the possibility of this happening. All the parents quoted above found the experience particularly unsettling and it may well have undermined their ability to participate through the rest of the conference.

Carers were asked for their views on having 'supporters' with them. Generally, carers were keen to be accompanied by a relative or friend:

It was a lot better with my mum there for support. You need someone. If you're on your own you feel like a budgie.

It helped having my mum there...They asked my mum for her opinions...They asked my mum whether my husband was violent to me. That didn't shock me...It was just asking about violence that caught me by surprise.

Other carers were more ambivalent in their attitude to being supported:

I was glad in a way they [grandparents] were there, but it was getting me mad as if I had nothing to do with it...My mum and dad were a bit of support.

I get more nervous when my mum is there but I prefer her being there.

In terms of 'facilities', parents expressed general satisfaction with those practical measures which had been taken to assist them to attend and take part in the conference. For example, the provision of transport to and from the conference was cited by a number of parents in this respect. In addition to overcoming basic practical problems, parents felt that this measure showed that agencies were genuinely interested in their attending the conference. Furthermore, if the family member was collected by an agency worker and taken to the conference, it meant that they did not have to enter the conference alone.

Some criticisms of the facilities were made. A few parents felt that they should have been able to bring their (young) children into the conference. One or two parents felt that inadequate attention had been given to child care problems. One suggested that where young children are concerned the



conference should be in the afternoon. Another said that there should have been nursery provision at the conference.

The environment and the 'atmosphere' of the conference generated a considerable amount of criticism. Some parents wished to smoke, others said that a cup of tea would have 'helped break the ice'. Some said that the room or the building in which the conference was held was inappropriate or unfriendly. The following were typical of those which were made in this respect:

They should have a special room, say 'here's a cup of tea while you're waiting'. They should let you smoke. They shouldn't give a cup of tea just to you, but for everyone. Let everyone sit down and relax for five minutes. You can build up what you want to say. Otherwise you're stuttering and stumbling.

I asked if I could smoke. They said they would prefer if I didn't. I said I'd have to. Then they said they didn't object.

The place it was held in was a really horrible place: closed in - the sort of place you see people being dragged out of. An absolute state.

They should have a side entrance... Immediately I walked in, I walked into two people I knew.

We had problems in getting a babysitter...They should make the places closer...I felt nervous...I always feel nervous...There was no chats, no cups of tea.

It was too much like a formal meeting. That's the way they run it. They should try to make it less formal, more personal, so you can have your say, so you feel you're being listened to. Otherwise you just put up barriers. You can answer some questions in one way and they take it completely the wrong way ...there was a big, huge table with up to nine people...some woman was jotting it down - whoever she was!

## **Post conference procedures**

The fourth area in which parents could be said to have encountered problems, in terms of participation, was in the period following the conference. These problems were of two sorts. The first concerned the emotional reaction of parents and their children - where they were in attendance - to having been through a case conference. As mentioned previously almost all the family members

interviewed found participation a difficult experience. Agency workers had been able to help family members through the conference, whether as a result of the preparation they gave beforehand, or the encouragement and support they gave during the conference. However, it would be unrealistic to think that the needs of family members, in terms of participation, ceased immediately the conference ended. On the contrary, some family members were very much in need of support or de-briefing, once the conference was over, as the following two quotes make clear:

After, she [daughter] just wanted to get home...Me and my daughter just broke down in the conference... It was a horrible experience.

It was degrading to myself...never again do I want to go through that.

The other type of problem related to parents' understanding of the outcome of the conference. Much of this boiled down to the fact that they were unclear as to what certain terms or procedures meant e.g. registration and case reviews. This lack of knowledge left some parents feeling 'up in the air', unclear as to what had really happened in the conference and what was to happen in the future. One mother interviewed some weeks after the conference, had not yet received the minutes of the conference. Had this record been available to her then she might have had a greater sense of having been involved in the conference. As it was, their non-arrival tended to undermine her belief that her participation really mattered.

## 6. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

### Introduction

This evaluation was based upon a total of 20 initial case conferences. At least one individual from 17 of the 20 families who were invited to attend the conference were interviewed, and 125 questionnaires were received from the 183 agency workers who attended these conferences. Although the number of conferences covered in the pilot period was relatively small, the evaluation was able to draw upon a fairly large volume of data. From this data it has been possible to identify a number of lessons concerning the practice of family participation in Liverpool.

The final section of this reports attempts to bring together all the data which has been discussed previously and highlight its main messages. The report is then brought to a close with a list of the main recommendations which the author sees as emerging from the evaluation.

It should be stressed that the report needs to be read and considered in its entirety. A large number of individuals, both agency workers and family members, have given up a considerable amount of time and effort to make the evaluation a success. In doing so they have raised important points concerning the future of family participation in Liverpool. To fully evaluate the practice of family participation and in order to maximise its success, it is essential that all these points are considered.

The following conclusions are not given in any order of priority but rather are listed in an order which reflects a more readable style. It will be up to agencies to define both the policy and the practice of family participation. It is intended that the conclusions and recommendations given here should aid that process but not substitute it.

### The Main Conclusions

#### **Family members firmly believe that they should be invited to initial case conferences**

Of the 20 families covered by the pilot project, 17 (85%) had some representation at the conference. Of the remaining three families who did not attend, only one showed any actual unwillingness to attend. As the comments on page 49 revealed, family members felt that there were a number of powerful arguments as to why they should be invited: it was their child and their parenting ability which was being discussed; they should have an opportunity to speak to the conference, and have a chance to receive information from the conference.

Interestingly, only one of the reasons cited above concerned participation per se, i.e. having a say. The other three could, perhaps, be seen as passive forms of participation. This finding should not be interpreted as evidence of an unwillingness by family members to participate. Rather, it indicates that family members viewed participation in broader terms. This is an important point as it has implications for both the style and the operation of conferences. To optimise 'participation' agency workers will always have to remember that they are dealing with individuals, that those individuals may wish to contribute to the discussion, but will also wish to receive information from other participants.

### **The vast majority of family members who attended a conference found the experience very stressful**

This was, perhaps, one of the most striking findings in the evaluation. The feelings of family members were illustrated very well by the recurring references to 'trials' and 'courts' (page 51). The more general comments of family members (page 51) and agency workers (pages 28-30) reinforce the impression that this experience was emotionally and psychologically very difficult.

It might be argued that this finding is not unexpected given the reasons for which the conferences were called, and the nature of conferences themselves. However, the feelings of family members within the conference are central to the whole issue of family participation. Attempts must be made to lessen the anxieties of family members prior to the conference, and then to provide them with support during the conference. Otherwise, many family members may be prevented from taking any meaningful participatory role.

### **The format of the conference was not conducive to family participation**

Family members identified many features of the conference environment, structure and procedures, which they felt discouraged their participation (page 58). To some extent there will always be a tension between the demands of the conference and the needs of family members who attend them: the conference needs to be conducted in something of a business-like manner, numerous agencies need to be represented, agency workers may be unfamiliar to the family, technical terms may need to be used. Having said this there are measures which could be taken with relatively little effort, which would significantly enhance a family's ability to participate. Examples of some of these, which were reported by agency workers are given on pages 38-44.

## **Efforts to 'prepare' family members for participation were at least moderately successful**

It appeared that agency workers rated levels of parent's preparedness slightly higher than the parents themselves did. As the pilot period represented the inauguration of participation, the levels reported by both groups could be considered to be quite satisfactory.

Preparation is one of the corner-stones of meaningful participation and consequently agencies must continue to invest in this aspect of participation. Specific suggestions concerning this are given below but as a general requirement there must be some form of continual assessment by individual workers and groups concerning the nature of the preparation they are undertaking and how well this meets the needs of families.

## **Family members participated in the conference to at least a moderate degree**

As with 'preparation', agency workers tended to rate 'participation' higher than the family members themselves. This was perhaps not so surprising as family members were probably more aware of the anxiety they were feeling and the effect that this was having upon their ability to participate: Overall, however, the levels of participation appeared to be quite satisfactory, especially given that this was a pilot exercise. If agency workers are able to develop their own competencies in this area, and if other changes (listed below) are brought about, it should be possible to significantly increase both the quantity and the quality of participation.

## **The presence of a family member had little effect upon the conference in general**

Asked to rate the overall success of the conference, agency workers reported virtually no difference between the 'attended' and the 'non-attended' conferences (Table 6). Only nine questionnaires indicated that the presence of a family member had had a detrimental effect upon the conference (Table 10). 24 questionnaires actually stated that the conference would have been enhanced if one, or more, family members had been present (Table 8).

From this evidence it appears that the presence of a family member rarely had a negative consequence for the conference. This is not to say that problems never occurred e.g. agency workers referred to an incident where a parent used her distress to manipulate the conference and one father was described as having made a series of unhelpful interruptions throughout the course of the conference. Therefore, one can certainly not afford to be complacent.

## **Family participation had some effect on the operation of the case conference**

55 respondents (52%) indicated that a family's presence did effect the operation of the conference (Table ). While large numbers reported an effect there was some variation in the nature of the effect. Some were clearly unwelcome: eleven questionnaires noted that discussion had been inhibited and eight believed that 'participation' had affected the flow of the conference (Table 12). While it must be accepted that 'participation' will cause some problems, it appears from this data that no major issues arose as a consequence of family participation in the pilot project. In fact agency workers cited a number of instances where 'participation' had positively benefited the conference.

## **The presence of family members did have some effect on agency workers behaviour**

Approximately one-third of respondents attending conferences reported that their behaviour had changed as a result of the family member being present (Table 13). Much of this change appeared to be benign and in general there were no major issues regarding this aspect of 'participation'. Ten respondents did say that they spoke less and nine said that they had withheld opinions. It is difficult to evaluate the significance of these remarks without further information but added to the three respondents who said that they had withheld information from the conference, it does appear as if there may be some issues to address here.

It may be that several avenues have to be pursued if agency workers are not to hold back inappropriately in conferences attended by family members. Training; the actions of the chairperson before and during the conference, and the efforts of individual workers, may all be important factors in minimising adverse reactions by agency workers to participation.

## **The presence of a family member affected the attitudes of a large number of agency workers**

58 (55%) of workers said that witnessing a family member in the conference, influenced their attitude to the family and/or its situation. The evaluation found that 'attitudinal' effects may be as important as the usually more frequently quoted behavioural effects. 31 respondents, for example, said they had become more sympathetic towards the family, having seen them at the conference (Table 16). 10 persons reported that they had become more anxious. The replies to this question are very interesting and have implications for family participation. It would seem that any future training programme would do well to explore these issues further. For example, do these replies indicate that some agency workers are insufficiently briefed prior to entering the conference; and is it appropriate that so many agency workers are so influenced?

## **Training for family participation is highly valued but currently there is insufficient provision**

An average of approximately one-third of all agency workers at the conference had not received any training on family participation. Fairly large numbers had attended the half-day conference (N=44) or the one-day workshop (N=36) but there was clearly some need for greater standardisation of training for workers. The second largest group of recommendations made by agency workers concerned the need for improved and/or increased training. The remarks of agency workers which were given on page 9, testify to the importance which they attach to training vis a vis participation.

## **Many of the problems experienced through participation will be specific to particular families, or agencies or conferences**

While this evaluation had judged participation to have been generally quite successful, problems did arise. When problems did arise, and some of them were quite serious, it appeared that many of them were specific to a particular situation and would not normally be thought of as applicable to conferences in general e.g. in one conference a family were very disturbed by the fact that a previous social worker (from another area) was present; in another conference the child was present while the details of her sexual abuse were recounted; in a third conference a mother was disturbed by the notes to which a nurse was taking. This report identifies numerous situations such as these. It may be that in developing the practice of family participation, agencies have to give as much attention to these more unique problems, than what might be seen as the more general issues of participation e.g. exclusions, aggression by family members and the withholding of information.

## **Exclusions were used fairly rarely**

Appendix III shows that five persons, all father figures, were not invited to the conference. Three of these men were alleged to have committed sexual abuse and two, physical abuse. These exclusions did not appear to cause significant problems for either the men concerned or their families. Those responsible for deciding upon exclusions seem then to be pitching their decisions at an appropriate level. Again, though constant monitoring would seem to be advisable to ensure that neither too many, nor too few, exclusions occur.

## **Young persons are able and willing to take part in family participation**

Three children who were the subject of the case conference were invited and attended. Although no child was interviewed for the purposes of this pilot, it was clear from their parents that their reactions to the case conference was similar to that of their parents. In some respects the children were more protected while in others they were more vulnerable to 'participation'. What the evaluation showed is that children should be given the opportunity to attend the conference, once they and their carers have been fully briefed as to what this entails. Many will exhibit the same anxiety levels in the conference as their parents. Agencies must, therefore, be particularly sensitive to their needs.

## **Recommendations**

Following on from all the data collected by this evaluation and its subsequent analysis this report finishes with a number of recommendations. As mentioned above, agencies should attempt to consider all the points made in this document and in the context of their practice and organisation attempt to take on board as many of the lessons of this report as possible. The author hopes that the recommendations below will act as the basis of a full and detailed discussion concerning the future of family participation in Liverpool.

1. Family members, including young persons should be invited to attend the initial case conferences.
2. Greater efforts should be invested in training agency workers for this practice. This should improve their ability to prepare parents and also to facilitate participation in conferences.
3. More investment should be made in preparation. This could take a variety of forms e.g. specific training for those agency workers responsible for carrying it out and improvement in the explanatory leaflet.
4. Chairpersons and keyworkers should brief families before they go into the conference, both to reassure them and to check that they do not have any last-minute concerns. The same persons should de-brief families at the end of the conference, to ensure that they have understood all that has gone on, and what decisions and recommendations have been made. A de-briefing session might also act on something of a therapeutic period for families.
5. Resources need to be invested in the 'material' side of participation. The venues should not be on social work premises. The rooms should be comfortable and relaxed. Families should be given practical assistance with travel and child care.



6. The format of the conference itself needs to be altered to make it more suitable for participation e.g. smaller numbers of agency staff, less use of technical terms, formal introductions and explanation of procedures. Agencies need to consider all the points made by workers and family members on this point.
7. Family members could be given a check-list/contract which sets out all the various aspects of participation and the child protection system which they should understand. This form could also set-out conditions which agencies agree to abide by e.g. time before which families receive case conference minutes. Family members could sign these forms to record that all aspects of participation e.g. the explanation of technical terms (case review, the child protection register etc.) have been explained to them. The chair could check this prior to the start of the conference.
8. Families should have access to an independent person to discuss any questions or concerns they have regarding 'participation' in particular and case conferences in general.
9. A regular monitoring exercise should be installed. Non-attending workers should be asked for the reason for their non-attendance; workers and family members at the conference could be asked to complete a one-page questionnaire on their view of the conference. Information on exclusions could also be gathered. This would be a fairly straightforward exercise but one which would enable agencies to maintain a constant check on the development of family participation. It would also allow changes over time to be noted, any emerging problems to be detected early on and would provide Liverpool A.C.P.C. a city-wide perspective on participation.

Appendix I

CODE NO. \_ \_ \_

FORM 2: CASE CONFERENCE QUESTIONNAIRE  
TO BE COMPLETED BY ALL PROFESSIONALS ATTENDING INITIAL CASE CONFERENCE

Agency Workers Questionnaire

1. Name:
2. Position, place of work and telephone no.:
3. Date of conference attended:
4. Time of conference attended:
5. Social service district covered by conference:

Professional background

5. How many years have you worked as social worker/ doctor/nurse/police officer/educationalist/other (please specify):
6. How many years have you been involved in child protection work?
7. Do you have any particular responsibility within your agency or place of work for child protection? If so, please describe:
8. Approximately how many initial case conferences have you attended (for any employer)?
9. Approximately how many initial case conferences have you attended where a family member of the subject child has been present for all or part of the time?

Preparation

10. What preparation have you received regarding parental participation in initial case conferences. Please select from one or more of the following categories:
  - (i) with previous employer
  - (ii) with current employer but not as part of current pilot project
  - (iii) as part of current pilot project, specifically:
    - (a) half day conference
    - (b) one-day workshop
    - (c) any preparation/training within an agency
    - (d) other (please specify)

Any comments you can give concerning the preparation you have received  
- in your current post - would be most valued:

Professional relationship with family

11. What was the professional context in which you were invited to attend this conference? (Please give professional relationship with child and/or family):
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
12. Have you or your agency been involved with this child and/or family in a child protection capacity prior to the current concern? If so, please give details e.g. reasons, dates/periods. (Please summarise if necessary.)
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
13. Prior to current concern.....  
Have you or your agency been involved with this child and/or family in any other capacity? If so, please give details:

14. Since the possibility of abuse or grave concern was first officially notified to your agency have either you or anyone else from your agency been directly involved with the child and/or family in any capacity? If so, please give details:

The Case Conference

15. Thinking about the general aims of initial case conferences i.e. sharing information; identifying areas of concern and making recommendations regarding the child's welfare, how successful do you think the conference was? Please identify the strengths and weaknesses which you felt were evident in this particular conference:

Please rate the overall success of the conference in terms of the objectives given above:

Very high	High	Medium	Low	Very low
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16. Was there anyone - either an agency worker or from the family - whose absence you felt was detrimental to achieving the objectives of the case conference? If so, please give details such as name, position, reason person was needed:

Similarly was there any information which by virtue of not being available to the conference was detrimental to the objectives of the conference? If so, please give details:

17. Was there anyone - either agency worker or from the family - whose presence you felt to be detrimental to the objectives of the case conference? If so, please give details:
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
18. What effect do you think the presence of the family member had upon the case conference in general e.g. in terms of its running, duration, communication?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
19. What effect did the presence of a family member have upon your behaviour at the case conference e.g. withheld specific information, withheld opinion, made greater distinction between fact and opinion, spoke less/more:

20. What effect did the presence of a family member have upon your feelings during the course of the case conference e.g. greater/lesser certainty over own professional views and recommendations; anxiety at speaking to the conference; greater/lesser sympathy for the parents.
21. Do you think the presence of a family member had an effect upon the behaviour or feelings of anyone else at the conference? If so, please give details:
22. In general how do you think the family member(s) felt during the case conference? e.g. a difficult but valued experience; traumatic and overwhelming; too anxious to actually contribute but still valued.
- 23(i) Can you identify any specific problems which the parents encountered during the case conference e.g. hostility from another individual; difficulty in understanding technical terms; found numbers overwhelming. Please distinguish between observations during the course of the conference and information made available to you after the conference.

- (ii) Do you know of any difficulties any family member faced in coming to the conference? e.g. time off work; child care; travel; domestic tension; venue; composition of conference. Please give details:

24. How well prepared do you feel the parents were for participating in the conference? e.g. understanding the purpose of the conference, why they had been invited, the role of the Chairperson.

What is your overall rating of parental preparedness for the case conference:

very well prepared	well prepared	moderate preparation	poor preparation	very poor preparation
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25. Do you feel the parents participated in the case conference? If so, in what ways did they participate?

What is your overall rating of the degree to which parents participated in the case conference:

very high level of participation	high level of participation	moderate level of participation	low level of participation	very low level of participation
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#### Post Conference

26. Do you feel, or have actual experience of, your relationship with the family to have been affected by their presence at the case conference? If so, please give details:

27. During your exposure to the idea and the actual experience of parental participation in initial case conferences, how have your views to this practice changed? Why is this?
28. What recommendations would you make to improve the practice of parental participation e.g. more training for agency workers; better preparation for parents; alteration to the format of the case conference:



## Appendix II

### Parent Interview Schedule

1. First of all I would like to begin by asking you have you and your family been affected by the calling of a case conference on your child?
2. Did you understand why the case conference was called and what it was able to do....?
3. Could you tell me in your own words why you think you were invited to attend the case conference.
4. What did you think about this invitation?
5. Did you receive any help or preparation to get yourself ready for attending the case conference (When, who by, nature of preparation):
6. How do you feel about this preparation you received e.g. was it necessary; was it adequate; were there areas not touched; how could it have been improved?
7. Were there any practical problems about attending the case conference in the first place e.g. child care; time off work; travel; access?

8. Can you tell me how it felt to be in the case conference.....?
9. Were there any aspects of the case conference you found particularly difficult e.g. the number of people present; the technical terms which were used; not being given an opportunity to speak; personal embarrassment....?
10. What things did you most appreciate about being able to attend the case conference e.g. to hear what was being said; to check the accuracy of what was being said; to be able to put your own point of view; to feel that you were involved in decisions affecting your child?
11. What things would you like to be done differently in future case conferences e.g. better preparation; additional facilities; more introductions; preliminary written reports?
12. What do you think the professionals gained by your presence?
13. Were there things you wished you had said at the case conference. What were these?
14. What do you think of the decision of the case conference?
15. Do you wish you had brought a friend or someone else to support you at the case conference?

16. How do you feel in general to the professions, which were represented at the case conference?

SSD:

NSPCC:

Health - doctors

Nurses:

Others:

Education:

17. How do you feel these agencies have worked with you and your child since the incident first came about?

18. Do you feel you have taken a part in decision-making surrounding your child in other areas or would you have liked more involvement. What changes would you have liked to see in the way in which agencies serve your child and your family?

