



When Can I Go Home?



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Your Expert Assessment Service

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This Webinar focuses on the culture; values & beliefs that are enshrined in our practice and influence the way in which we work. These values and beliefs may restrict us from *making* sound long term decisions regarding outcomes for children and young people who are in public care.



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Sam's Story 1

- *At 6 months' old, Sam was removed from home in England's West Country. Sam was placed with prospective adoptive parents in Wales at 18 months after spending a year in public care.*
- *This is considerably longer than would now be deemed 'good enough' for him; however his situation occurred at a time when court timetables were not as tightly prescribed as they are today in the UK.*
- *After only 6 months, Sam's adoptive placement broke down due to physical abuse by his prospective adoptive father.*
- *Sam was subsequently removed and placed back in to public care. His previous placement was no longer available to him and therefore, Sam was accommodated with Foster Carers who were strangers to him.*



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Sam's Story 2

Placement Breakdown

- ***By the age of 2, Sam had experienced neglectful care by his mother, physically abusive care by his prospective adopters & parenting by 2 sets of foster carers.***
- ***Sam went on to experience 23 further changes in his care givers before he was imprisoned at 16 years old.***
- ***At the time his prospective adoptive placement broke down (18 months old), it appears that Sam's 19 year old birth mother came forward to be assessed for him to return.***
- ***She was already successfully parenting a second child by that time. However, there is no record on file that she was subject of an assessment & Sam remained in public care. This could have been the first missed opportunity to change outcomes for Sam and return him to his birth family.***

Sam's Story 3



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- *Sam's mother would have continued to share parental responsibility with the Local Authority throughout his looked after history, as he was never made subject of an adoptive order. Despite this however, she appears to have been overlooked with respect to any possible reunification.*
- *From Sam's perspective, one could say that the initial failure for Sam was shared between his mother/family for not providing good enough care when he was a baby and the Local Authority for failing to review his outcomes despite numerous opportunities to include a return to his family of origin. Ask ourselves, If the court had filed in favour of the mother and she failed again, I believe we would have taken action. Why was the situation not reversed when we failed Sam?*
 - *He is one of the young people that I would suggest*

Sam's Story 4: Release

- ***Sam is about to be released from his second term of imprisonment for offences of violence and sexualised behaviour.***
- ***Evidence within his extensive history as a looked after child suggests that he was physically and sexually assaulted whilst in public care.***
- ***According to Sam, the sexual assaults were not taken seriously and there is no evidence of an investigation on file.***
- ***During my career I spent 7 years as Manager of a Child Sexual Abuse Service and it was evident that a failure to investigate when children disclose abuse often contributed to their extremes of behaviour in addition to the acts of abuse themselves. This was clearly the case for Sam.***

Sam's Story 5: Acute Attachment Disorder



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- *Sam was subject of a Psychological Assessment at the age of 9 years where no diagnosis was given.*
- *It was deemed at that time that his behaviour was a direct result of his circumstances.*
- *Despite having no diagnosis, Sam has an entry on his file, dating back a number of years, of Acute Attachment Disorder*
- *This diagnosis has followed him and impacted on his prospect of a long term placement throughout his life. As social workers we are aware of the difficulties of placing children with foster carers or particularly adopters when it is believed that they will have difficulties attaching to their carers. Sam's 25 placements would suggest that he did struggle, however it may have been the case that his carers perceived his challenging behaviour as a lack of ability to attach and used his spurious diagnosis as a way of moving him on to another placement.*
- *Nobody knows where the diagnosis originated, but it is recorded in every LAC review report. This suggests it was never questioned.*



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Sam's Story 6: Professional Judgements

- *When I read Sam's Story, I was outraged and I found it really difficult to accept why others may not have shared this outrage. As opposed to changing his placement over and over again, why did the professionals not concentrate their efforts on returning him to his family, following each of his placement breakdowns?*
- *Was it the case that professionals acting on his behalf were making value judgements & decisions based on their conscious or unconscious beliefs about Sam's family?*

For Example:

- **“She had her chance & failed, so there is no point”**
- **“She has another child and two would be too much for her”**
- **“Families are dangerous places”**
- **“This child is further damaged, she couldn't cope before so she will never cope now”**
- **“After what has happened, he deserves more than good enough care”**

To ensure that we can be certain that our values and beliefs are not clouding our judgment, we need to identify and understand where things might go wrong. A proven model used by CF Social Work at practitioner and management level is the concept of:

Firm and Shifting Ground

This model can be used to:

- ***Inform decision making.***
- ***Act as a trouble shooting tool for any problems within individual, team or organisational culture.***
- ***Help to identify deficits in practice that may impact on performance and therefore outcomes.***



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FIRM GROUND

- ***Firm Ground is the place where we are confident about what we believe in.***
- ***Firm Ground is the place that supports our beliefs and values about what we do.***
- ***Firm Ground is the place where we work best and the place we can return to when work becomes difficult, unclear, unsafe or conflictual.***



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FIRM GROUND CONSISTS OF 6 COMPONENTS

- 1. Our existing knowledge backed by experience, research, legislation, guidance & procedures.**

I.E. If the social worker is fully aware of the safeguarding procedures and the LA policy for safeguarding, they are far more likely to behave in a confident manner making decisions informed by their knowledge

- 2. Practice skills based on experience.**

If you are faced with an aggressive parent, a newly qualified social worker may feel threatened, frightened or uncertain and lose focus on their reason for being in their situation. Whereas a more experienced social worker would be on firmer ground as a result of being able to draw on their training and experience of successfully dealing with situations like these in the past.



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3. The strength of team members convictions about the rights of young people

If the culture that you work in supports your strong convictions that children and young people have a right to good enough care, then this is reinforced in what we talk about in the team, what we do, what we reflect upon and keeps us open to new and changing ideas. If you really go along with the paramountcy principle – then this should inform everything that you do.

4. Confidence in colleagues, managers and the organisation

When you know that your manager/supervisor will back you up when situations become difficult and that the organisation within which you work has a culture of sharing the same values beliefs and convictions, then if you take a decision that may be viewed by some as risky, you are on firm ground and can think imaginatively when making decisions for children.



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5. An acknowledgement of power differentials or the capacity to feel outrage or a sense of unfairness.

Sam has never had an advocate and has never been in a position to influence a single decision made about his life. An advocate who could represent his rights may have altered the balance of power between him as a solitary troubled child and a vast organisation making decisions for him. It appears that there has been nobody in his life who had a sufficient sense of outrage that he was being discriminated against as a result of this imbalance of power. Such a person who possessed that sense of outrage would have been on firm ground advocating for Sam in this regard. Sam was being treated unfairly and he needed somebody with a sense of fairness.

6. The ability to reflect on and evaluate the 6 components.

The ability to ask yourself – what am I doing and why am I doing it and how could I do it differently to achieve better outcomes? When an assessment is negative, who's failure is that – is it the parents who seemingly cannot change or is it the assessor who did not try hard enough to find mechanisms for change? Did our attitude towards the family prevent us from finding change?

NOTES FOR FIRM GROUND

As an independent social worker I have read countless notes of social workers who have abandoned their assessment on the basis that the parent was angry and therefore perceived as not being able to 'work in partnership'. I would say, of course they are angry, I would be angry if the state failed my child.

Having a child removed from your care, is for many unimaginably difficult, therefore if a child is then subject to harm whilst being looked after by those who alleged to provide 'more than good enough care', of course this causes outrage. It is surely our job to overcome the parents anger, demonstrate some empathy as to why this may be the case and work alongside them for the sake of the child. Social Workers who are on firm ground and who are supported by their seniors are more likely I would suggest, to have the confidence to find a solution.



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SHIFTING GROUND

Shifting Ground is the place where we are uncertain or unconfident about what we believe, say or do.

Shifting Ground is an inevitable place to occupy at times.

The key to moving on to firmer ground is to recognise & acknowledge when we are on Shifting Ground & which of the following is placing us there:

- ***Where knowledge is incomplete or not backed by research.***
- ***Where practice skills are undeveloped or not deployed.***
- ***Where young people's rights are not prioritised or ignored.***
- ***Where there is limited confidence in colleagues, managers or organisations.***

Where the impact of discrimination is unacknowledged.

- ***Where there is little to no reflection or evaluation of what one does / or on what basis we make decisions.***



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Sam's Story – Shifting Ground

- *With respect to his alleged Acute Attachment Disorder Diagnosis - Professionals do not appear to have questioned the accuracy or validity of this diagnosis & it has remained on his file & review reports since the age of 9.*
- *Sam's label of Learning Difficulties – this was in effect a cognitive delay due to Sam not attending school regularly & experiencing countless changes in his educational setting.*
- *An assumption that Sam's mother would not be able to cope due to her having a 2nd child without formal assessment.*
- *An assumption that Sam's grandmother would not prioritise her grandson over her son, again without assessment.*
- *A lack of enquiry by the LAC Reviewing Officer who appears to have accepted the historical assumptions of the professionals.*
- *An assumption that because other family members did not come forward, they are not interested in being assessed.*



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Sam's Story: - Firm Ground

- *With full support of management, the social worker questions the accuracy and validity of Sam's diagnosis of Acute Attachment Disorder & Learning Difficulties.*
- *Sam could then be referred to an Educational Psychologist for review, pending his move to High School. The Educational Psychologist might then discover, contrary to his case file, that he has neither Acute Attachment Disorder nor Learning Difficulties.*
- *Acting on Firm Ground, the Social Worker would then surely wonder what other aspects of Sam's file & assumptions regarding Sam, are also inaccurate or without sufficient assessment.*
- *In this instance, the Social Worker might draw up a full & detailed chronology which highlights key facts such as:*
 - Number of moves*
 - Changes in Social Worker*
 - Work/Therapy recommended but never actioned*

A detailed chronology can provide the 'bigger picture' which underscores any deficits in decision making. These inaccuracies could then be raised with the Reviewing Officers who might ensure that all record of inaccurate information be deleted from Sam's records.



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Sam's Story: Firm Ground Relating To Sam's Mother

- *It is recorded on file that Sam's mother is 'confrontational, angry & aggressive', which appears to have precluded her from being assessed as she was likely deemed incapable of working in partnership with the LA.*
- *The Social Worker, on Firm Ground, would view the mother's feelings in relation to Sam while in the care of the state, to be positive and consider their role to be supportive rather than dismissive.*
- *This could be the first step to building a Firm Ground on which to undertake an unbiased assessment of Sam's circumstances, not based on the assumptions of others who believed the mother's anger could not be overcome or was irrational.*



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Sam's Story: Outcomes 1

- ***As stated previously, Sam's mother was never assessed.***
- ***File notes suggest that she had repeated her request to be assessed at various times during Sam's Looked after history.***
- ***It seems unconceivable therefore that given the 25 opportunities the professionals had to explore her circumstances when Sam's placements broke down, reunification was not considered. There is little doubt that she would have changed as her age would have dictated some increase in maturity.***
- ***She had maintained the care of her second child who is now rising 13 years and had remained separated from Sam's father.***
- ***It is my understanding that sadly Sam's mother is no longer fighting. It is now her clear view that Sam's behaviour is so extreme that she finally agrees with the Local Authority that she would not cope. Sam has become a victim of his own circumstances.***



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Sam's Story: Outcomes 2

In discussion with a colleague I asked the question – for children who have been subject of negative experiences in the care system, have you ever known a parent to walk out of a review and say to their child ‘get your coat you are coming home with me’?

His answer was ‘never in 45 years of practice’. I have never seen it happen either.

This made me question, why is this?

- Was the process so damaging to them that the fear of returning to it prevents them from protecting their child?*
- Is this how we make people feel? That the only way they can cope with the process is to grieve the child as if they had died?*
- Is this why they often give up on this child and become pregnant again in the hope that they will avoid detection by the LA?*
- Is this why despite fighting to the final hearing, parents often leave court with a sense of ‘well I*

Sam's Story: Outcomes 3



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- **What would have happened to Sam & his mother, had she taken him home at any point during his 25 placement breakdowns following the care order?**
- **Is there a court in the land who would have stopped her from taking him home or suggesting that he has been subject to good enough care in the state system?**
- **Why do parents and families not appear to feel able to fight for reunification with their children after they are exposed to poor outcomes in state care?**
- **In these circumstances, should parents not ask the question, “how is your care any better than mine?” Why are they not standing up and fighting?**
- **What standards are we working towards as social work professionals? Surely**

JUST A THOUGHT WITH SAM IN MIND

As a consideration, should a Regulatory body i.e. HCPC In the UK, set up a system whereby each social worker during their career and as part of their professional learning and development, revisit 5 cases looking back at:

The impact of their decision making on the outcome of the case

- *Why did they think they were right?*
- *Consider the impact of their values and beliefs at the time they made significant decisions for the child and compare them with what they believe now*
- *Consider what impact their decision had on that person's life. What would/could they have done differently?*
- *Do you still feel the same sense of outrage towards the family? Or do you feel a sense of responsibility for your decision and for not exploring options within the family more fully.*



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Final Thoughts: Changing Lives

- *This seminar goes out to at least 22,000 subscribers of Social Work Helper.*
- *I invite all 22,000 of you to think of just one child or young person who might be like Sam, facing life in public care often with strangers as their caregivers and decision makers.*
- *If each of you have some sympathy with what you have heard today and share your thoughts with 1 colleague, 22,000 more Sam's may achieve an opportunity to have a family alternative to public care.*
- *Our combined efforts and responsibility to this vulnerable group of children could avoid 44,000 children and young people living with outcomes that have led to undetermined periods in public care with little or no hope of change.*