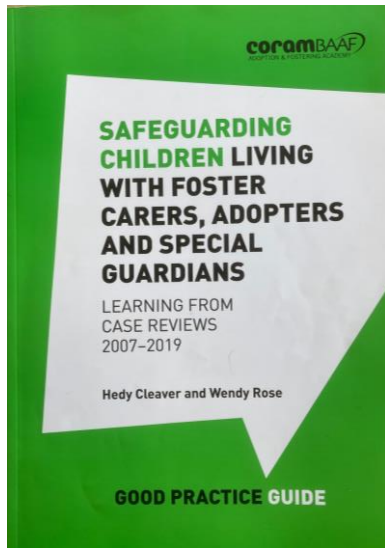
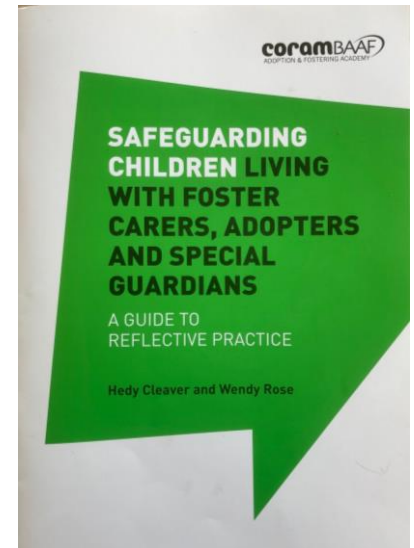


Safeguarding children living with foster carers, adopters and special guardians



Learning from Case Reviews



Hedy Cleaver and Wendy Rose

15th November 2022

The context in Wales

- Steady rise in the number of children looked after: in England 80,850 and over 6,000 in Wales for year ending 31 March 2021
- Government's austerity policies resulted in shortfall in children's social care funding
- Difficulties in recruiting and retaining social workers, use of agency staff
- Pressure on local authorities to identify and assess carers – exacerbated by Covid19

Case reviews

- 52 published reviews over 12 year period 2007-2019
- England = 45, Wales = 6, Scotland = 1
- Reviews provided rich insights and emerging themes were clearly identifiable
- Reviews were very different in size and format, and used different methods of reviewing
- Reviews varied in information on: the local authority, child's sex, age, ethnicity, or disability

Who were the carers at the time of the incident (n=52)

- 39 (75%) cases involved foster carers
- 7 (13%) cases involved adopters
- 6 (12%) cases involved special guardians

What happened to the children (52 cases – 98 children)

- Children who died = 19
- Children who were seriously harmed = 79
 - Sexually abused = 49 (62%) half involved a serial abuser
 - Physically abused = 23 (29%)
 - Neglect = 4 (5%)
 - Other = 3 (4%) children who had killed or abused another

Child characteristics (n=98)

- 19 children died:
- Age was a factor in child fatalities, but not their sex
 - Young children tended to die from fatal physical abuse or severe neglect
 - Teenagers tended to kill themselves
- 79 children seriously harmed:
- Majority of children seriously harmed had been sexually abused, of these:
 - 70.5% were less than 10 years old
 - 62% were girls
- Children with disabilities over-represented in the sample and higher proportion died

Concerns over quality of carer assessments

- Reviews identified concerns about the assessment of carers in 23 of the 52 cases
- 14 (36%) cases involved foster carers
- 3 (43%) cases involved adopters
- 6 (100%) cases involved special guardians
 - All the special guardianship reviews had been published between 2016 and 2019

Avoiding the pitfalls identified in the assessment and selection of carers (1)

- Rigorous scrutiny, verification and analysis of information from all relevant sources
- Fully explore applicants' previous history
- Discover all critical information
- Follow up references and do not take them at face value
- Explore applicants' motivation to care for a child
- Keep a safeguarding focus during assessment

Avoiding the pitfalls identified in assessment and selection of carers (2)

- Follow up any professional unease
- Do not allow anxiety about discrimination to inhibit probing and affect judgements
- Be objective with long standing carers
- Adequate scrutiny by fostering & adoption panels and decision-makers is essential
- Thorough assessment when child changes status or transfers to a different provider or moves to another area
- Detailed and comprehensive assessments for special guardianship

Matching child and family: key issues

- SWs and carers need to understand long-term impact of abuse and neglect, and effects of placement changes on a child
- Adequate preparation and training for carers
- Adequate preparation and support for the child
- Explore possible impact on all children in the household
- Identify necessary skills, qualities and experience of carers and their support needs

Challenges to understanding a child's experience of living with carers (1)

- Local authorities have a duty to support and review child's safety and wellbeing; however difficulties can arise as a result of:
 - Carousel of social workers, high turnover of staff and lack of time and resources
 - Referrals seen in isolation
 - Not listening to or hearing child's views and wishes
 - Children with disabilities need additional help to get their views heard
 - Other available support rarely secured, e.g. independent visitors or mentors

Challenges to understanding a child's experience of living with carers (2)

- Carers erect barriers to knowing a child
 - Home schooling
 - Absence from school
 - Missed appointments
- Carers influence professional judgments
 - Creating a positive impression
 - Avoiding oversight
 - Dividing professional opinion
- Professionals assume children are safe when placed – essential to maintain professional uncertainty

Carers controlling the child's narrative

- Preventing professionals from seeing children in private
- Blaming the child for signs of abuse and neglect
- Fabricating or inducing illness in the child
- Influencing children through:
 - Bribes
 - Fear
 - Undermining trust in professionals

Everybody's responsibility

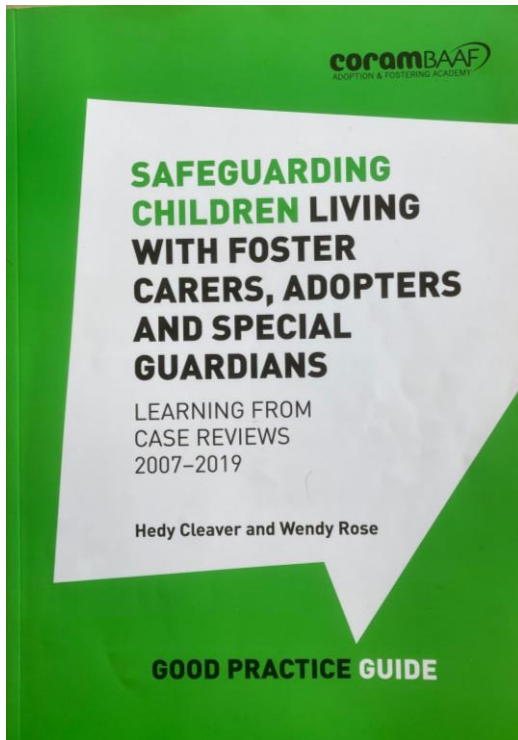
- These children's lives were particularly complex; many different professionals were involved
- Other barriers to a shared response:
 - No lead professional or co-ordinator
 - Uncertainty of how to escalate concerns
 - Lack of formal processes
 - Focus on own professional specialism
 - Changes of local authority

Key messages from the study (1)

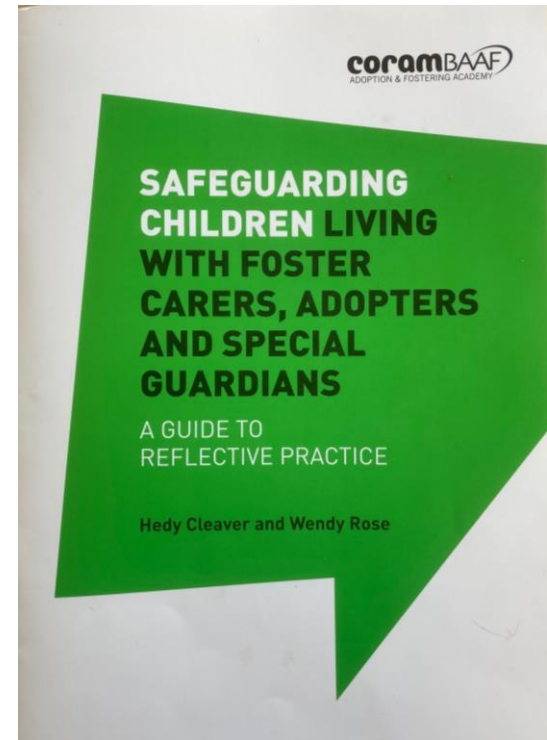
- Every child placed away from home needs to feel wanted and loved, and safe and secure
- Keep each child in mind and at the heart of all decisions, including the choice of their placement
- In supporting and reviewing each child, ensure their views and wishes are heard and acted upon
- Build strong networks of well inter-connected professionals around each child and their carers

Key messages from the study (2)

- Assessments need to be rigorous, have a safeguarding focus and explore sensitive issues
- Children often come from complex backgrounds: carers will need considerable support
- Professional unease and uncertainty about carers should always be addressed
- Improve leadership, supervision and support for professionals through local authority investment



Thank you



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