



CONSULTATION DAYS WITH SERVICES

A total of 92 people from some 36 agencies were consulted in four parts of the country. Debates were held in small groups with a researcher. This is a collated outline of their discussions. The discussion began exploring the challenges and effective methods of delivering a child-centred approach; first by looking at how they deliver this when working with parents, and in the subsequent discussion – when working with children. In each case the discussion begins with what is effective.

Question: When trying to deliver an effective child-centred approach with parents, what works? (In order of most frequently mentioned)

- **Key issues:**

- **Effective methods and approaches:**

An unattached third person in attendance, such as a mediator, can help the parents feel more comfortable with the situation, as can small groups and peer parent support. Access to other agencies that may help them in a different way can be beneficial to parents. Parents may benefit from counselling or mediation in addition to your service. Appropriate literature and research can help parents understand the issues and feel less alone.

- **Build up a rapport:**

Build a good non-judgemental relationship with parents and aim to gain their trust.

- **The child's perspective:**

Enable parents to see issues from the child's point of view and to acknowledge the child's feelings. One method of doing this is the 'empty chair perspective' – where the parent visualizes the child in the chair and consider how what is said affects them.

- **Practical help for parents:**

Empower the parents and help them in practical ways, such as how to write and say appropriate things to the child. To help with this, teach parents ways to play and have fun with the child.

- **Be child-centred:**

A child centred focus is the key. It helps the parents to view the child as the priority, and to see issues from their perspective. Help parents to understand the children's rights.

- **Your role and the process:**

Ensure parents understand the process and what is expected of them. Set out what they can expect from the service and clarify the role of the practitioner.

- **Other suggestions of what works:**

- Be approachable and empathetic.
- Involve both parents if possible.
- Listen.
- Provide an environment that feels safe and comfortable.
- Maintain a positive outlook.

Effective listening was repeatedly emphasised. It is important to listen attentively to build up trust in the relationship and identify the issues of particular importance to the child.

Question: When trying to deliver an effective child-centred approach with parents, what is difficult? (In order of most frequently mentioned)

- **Key issues:**

- **Personal issues between parents or other family members**

Parents' problems with each other can mean they do not communicate so well with their children and children's needs can get overlooked. Each parent may feel insecure and distrustful of the other. This may lead one parent to think that the other is influencing the child's views. Some parents have personal difficulties, and may be reluctant to re-visit their past, or have entrenched views about school. Drug or alcohol use can make communication with parents difficult. Parents may be defensive if they feel their parenting skills are being judged. Extended family members who get involved during a couple's break-up can sometimes cause difficulties as it may be hard for you to counter views which they have put forward.

- **Expectation management**

Give parents a clear understanding of the process - what you can and can't do - and what the court can deliver. Adequate time needs to be spent with parents to engage with them. It is helpful to reduce the risk of misunderstandings if both parents are present.

- **Parents may not understand the impact their split is having on the child**

Parents cannot always see the child's perspective and may struggle to prioritise the child's needs above their own. They may need help to understand how important it is to listen to the child's wants and needs, so they feel heard. Some parents assume that if they talk to the child about the separation it will upset them. However our research has shown that children want parents to address the areas of concern for their child.

- **Constraints of the service:**

Every service has constraints. These may include:

- Delays in referrals.

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- Restricted powers within a service.
- The court process takes too long.
- Solicitors can cause conflict when individuals rights and interests pushed.
- A lack of knowledge of how to access information about other services or research in the field.

● **Parents who manipulate their children**

It can be difficult to know when a child says something because they have been manipulated by one of their parents. Some children say things out of loyalty to their parents, whilst others have been 'coached'.

● **Other factors that can create constraints:**

- Upset or distressed parents.
- Un-cooperative parents.
- Parents lack of trust in the system.
- Parents who do not want their children to be involved.
- Parents focused on themselves.
- Cultural differences.
- Financial issues.

Question: When trying to deliver an effective child-centred approach with children what works? (In order of most frequently mentioned)

● **Key issues:**

● **Activities and resources**

Engage children in activities that will encourage participation and help them to express their thoughts in a variety of ways. Offer a choice of activities and resources as children will respond differently to certain approaches. Drama and role plays can be useful. The child may find it beneficial to put their thoughts down on paper. Some practitioners suggest taking the child to visit the court is helpful.

● **Techniques for successful management of a child-centred consultation:**

- Build a relationship with the child and really get to know them as an individual.
- Emphasise the benefits of sessions and be upfront with the child.
- Make the child aware of their rights.
- Make clear situations change, and the child can change their mind at any time.
- Consult the child about how they want to work and what they want to do next.
- Talk to the child as an equal.
- Ask the child questions such as: How do you think things have changed? How do you think things need to change? How will you make it happen?
- Give the child plenty of time and space.
- Try not to have taboo subjects.

● **Make sure that the child clearly understands the process**

Children like to be kept well informed. You should be clear about your role and level of involvement from the start. Ensure that information is given appropriately for the age and developmental stage of the child.

● **Practitioner Qualities**

Confidentiality is extremely important to most children. They need to trust you and feel secure and safe in your presence. Children particularly appreciate a practitioner who is open and honest, reliable, caring, respectful and creative. Children like to be respected, and to know that their view is valued. They need to feel understood, and often look for reassurance that they are not to blame.

● **Other factors which contribute to success:**

- Provide a safe and relaxed environment.
- Listen.
- Ensure the child knows they are not responsible for decision making.
- Involve parents and siblings.
- Offer a support network.
- Treat the child as an individual.
- Provide the child with some stability.
- Work as a team.

Question: When trying to deliver an effective child-centred approach with children what is difficult? (In order of most frequently mentioned)

● **Key issues:**

● **Lack of understanding and training in services, and other limitations**

Some practitioners feel that they lack understanding and do not have relevant training in delivering a child-centred approach. They feel that they would benefit from more training in the areas of domestic violence and dealing with conflict. Services may lack consistency.. Sometimes children get passed between different agencies, as well as different workers within agencies. It was felt that this is not good for the child as they have to keep re-telling their story and there is far less chance of them building up a trusting relationship with any one worker. They suggest that the general public as well as professionals need to be more aware of children's rights and the need to be child-centred. In particular, the courts need to listen more to children to avoid what was described as the 'deaf ears' of the system.

● **The child may have problems with communication**

Children may find it hard to express themselves for a variety of reasons. Some of the most commonly mentioned reasons are below. Children may feel:

- Disloyal to their parents.
- Responsible for their parents separating.
- Over protective of their parents.
- Confused about how they feel.
- Fearful, in case they get into trouble.
- Worried that they will make things worse.
- Distressed, upset or angry.

● **When the child knows how to work the system**

Some children know exactly what they need to say to professionals in order to get the result they want.

● **The child may not understand how the service works**

It is hard for children to grasp how services operate, and they may feel intimidated by the presence of lots of professional adults. Many practitioners suggest that dressing casually helps to break down barriers and helps to put the child at ease. It also helps to have a frank discussion in appropriate language with the child in the very first meeting. The child needs to understand the process and have realistic goals.

● **Difficulties with parents**

Sometimes parents find it hard to be child centred. They are in the middle of their own personal crisis and may need help to adjust their thinking.

● **Other difficulties mentioned:**

- Treat siblings as individuals.
- Gain the child's trust.
- Ensure confidentiality.
- Decision making can put too much pressure on children.
- Stigma attached to children who seek help.
- Limited time is available to spend with each child.

When practitioners were asked about gaps in provision related to a child-centred approach, the following emerged as the key issues for concern:

● **Resources and funding**

- Funding is often short term, threatening programmes which are successful.
- Funding is often very specific and has to be spent on what it is allocated for. This can exclude work that is required.
- Funding is not common for children over 16, but they need it too.
- Services often know where gaps are and where money needs to be spent but they do not get a say.
- Funding is required for staff training.

● **Networking and information sharing**

- Services have little knowledge about what other services do.
- A system is needed for information sharing and service networking (Young Voice is providing this).
- There is a lack of communication between agencies.
- Links need to be forged between voluntary and statutory services.

● **Appropriately trained workers**

- All staff that come into contact with children should be given specialist training in a child-centred approach.
- Staff members often lack up to date training.
- Training that is offered needs to be evaluated.
- All staff should be trained in child protection issues.
- Training on the legal context of Divorce and Separation is required.

● Listen to Young people

- Children's thoughts and opinions are not always heard.
- Professionals need to be more aware of children's needs and wishes.
- Professionals need to learn to listen attentively to children.
- Some children are 'invisible' to services.

● Lack of follow-up / long term work

- Long term monitoring of certain situations is required, what happens when contact between children and professionals stops?.
- Children's decisions should be followed up and explored with them.
- Children may change their mind after a period of time and require more help and guidance.

● Cultural awareness and sensitivity

- Increase cultural awareness.
- Staff are not always sensitive enough.
- More training is needed in cultural issues.

● Accessibility of services

- Children need to be able to access services themselves.
- There is too much reliance on adults to identify problems and make them known.
- Self referral of children can be difficult because of the stigma attached.

● Facilities needed

- More safe venues where young people can meet and gather.
- Additional supervised / safe contact centres.
- More neutral child friendly spaces.

● Build on the child-parent relationship

- Practitioners need to spend more time helping to develop the child/parent relationship.

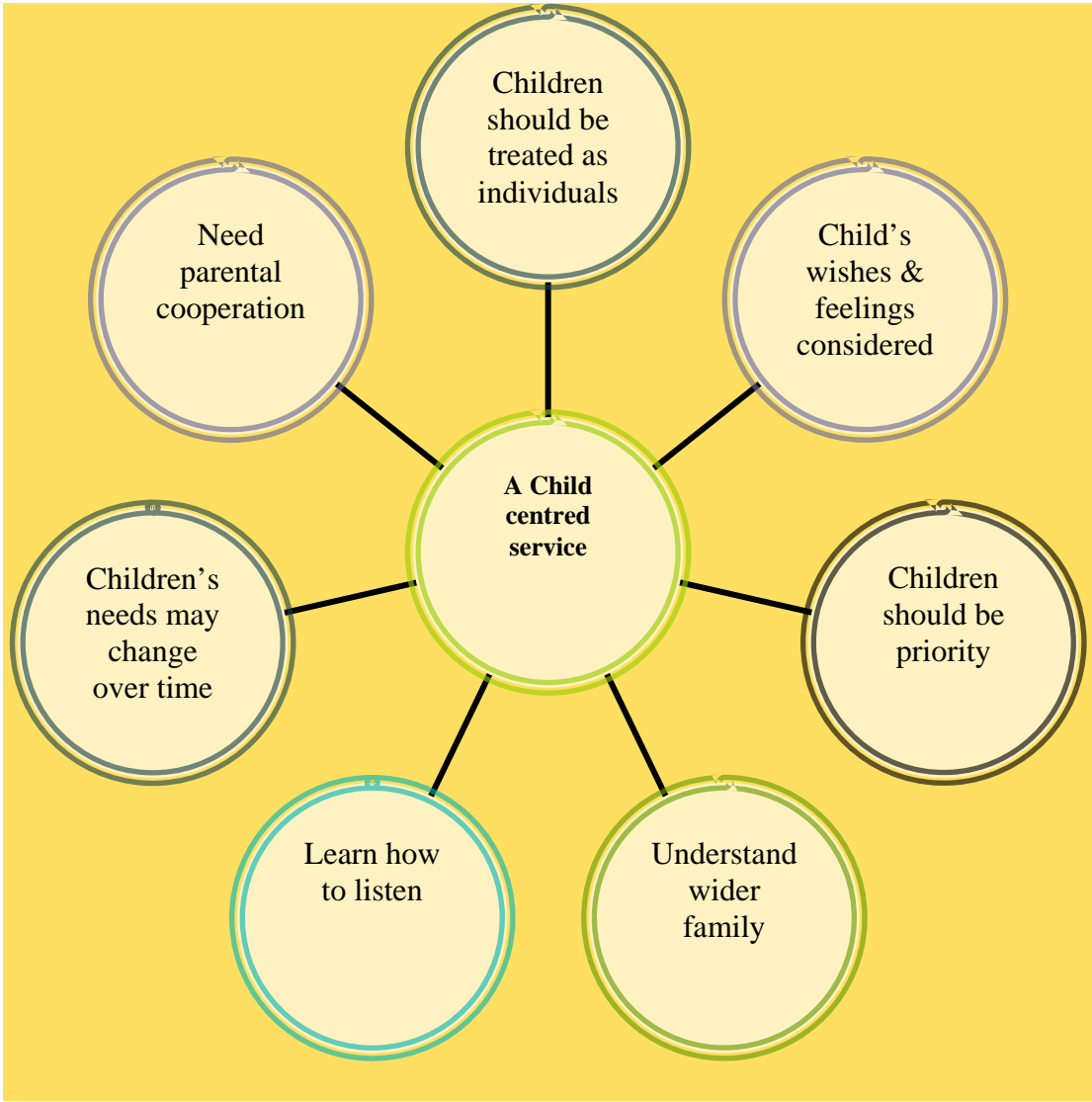
● Normalising relationships

- Children need access to other children in a similar situation to themselves.
- The potential for a child's friends to support them through change is often overlooked.

● Privacy and confidentiality

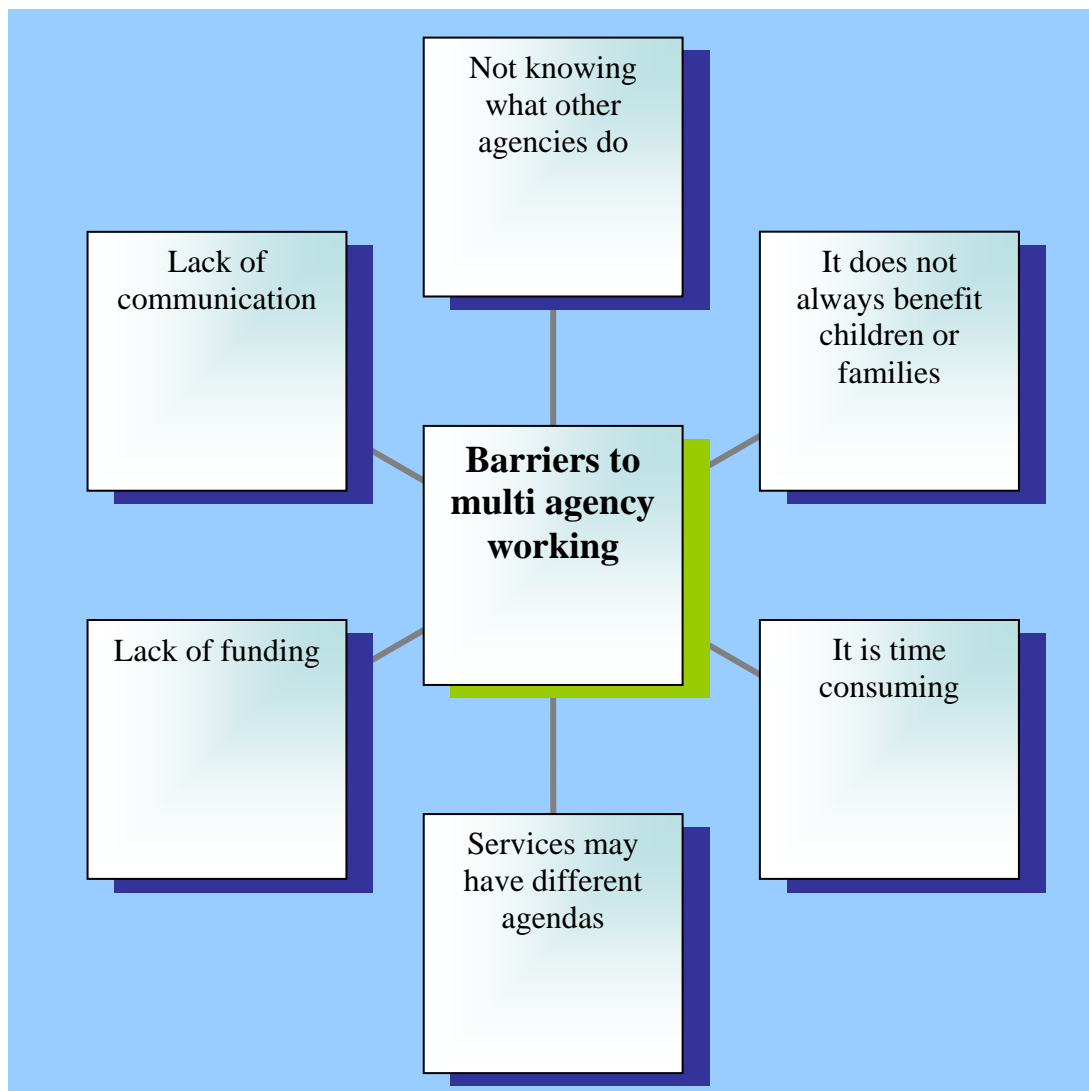
- It can be difficult to know how much information to share with a child and whether or not to show them certain information.
- When professionals come to visit a child at school, more privacy is needed.

Lessons when developing Child-centred services



When asked what information and knowledge was needed for multi agency working, these were the most common answers:

- A key worker is needed to oversee the process and be a gatekeeper.
- A nationwide database where agencies can access information on individual children needs to be available.
- There needs to be closer links between voluntary and statutory organisations.
- All agencies need to be listed on a website with information about what they do and contact details.
- A framework needs to be agreed which all agencies can work to
- Successful models of good practice would be very helpful.
- Job titles should be more standard so that it is easier to understand what professionals roles are.



Several debate sessions were held during the day. Below are the salient points from some of these sessions.

● **Question: Does multi agency working add anything to family support?**

● **Yes**

- Multi agency working operates well when you have a key worker (co-ordinator).
- Different agencies have different skills, so it is beneficial to work together.
- Multi agency working is relatively new and can be fantastic, but it needs a lot of hard work to get to that stage.
- It gives work more 'power' if different agencies all agree.
- It can give families more confidence to know that there is a partnership between agencies.
- Information sharing within a multi agency approach can really help; things may just fall into place and change the whole perspective.
- With a multi agency approach you can see the bigger picture.

● **No**

- It can cause a lot of confusion.
- Children may receive help from lots of agencies but still claim they have not received any help when asked, so multi agency working does not necessarily benefit them.
- Data sharing still produces certain difficulties, and can dilute trust between the client and practitioner.

● **Important points to consider:**

- Communication is key.
- Services need to be open and provide services suitable to both sexes and all cultures.
- Child-centred practice should mean you aware of the child's background and culture.
- You need skilled staff who have relevant training
- Child centred principles and ethics need to be in place across all agencies.
- Consistency across services is necessary.

● **Question: Should Children and Young People be involved in heavily contested cases?**

● **Yes**

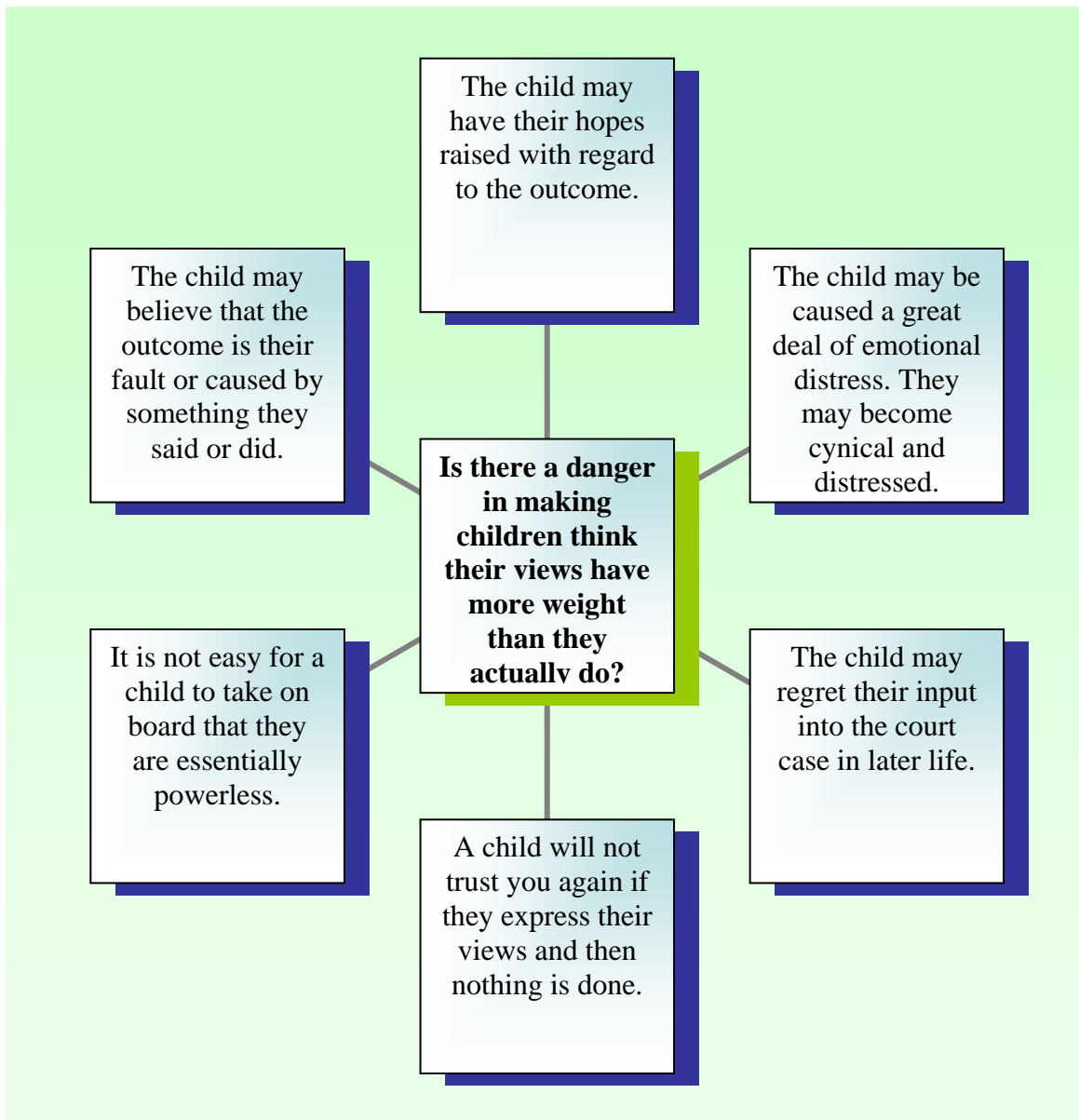
- Children should have a role because their views are important.
- Children should be heard but not given responsibility for making decisions.
- Children often do not want to be involved, but should be told that the door is open, and that they can voice their views if they wish.
- It is vital for children to be involved from the start, especially in contested cases; otherwise they may not see the decision which is reached as being legitimate.

● **No**

- To encourage children is all well and good but if the decision making and 'power' of consulting the child are not reflected in the home environment, it's worthless.

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- Consultation methods need to be appropriate so that too much pressure is not put on the child.
 - There are children who might be traumatized. Circumstantial and environmental differences need to be taken into account.
- **Important points to consider:**
- Each case needs to be considered individually.
 - If possible, make sure the child is not influenced by either parent.
 - How well trained are the professionals involved? It has to be the right person and they have to be well trained.
 - Some families are very closed and issues may be considered to be ‘family secrets’. Children brought up in this kind of environment might find it hard to open up.
 - There is a danger in over-burdening children with decisions.
 - The child’s safety and wellbeing must be carefully considered, as once they have put their view across they have to return to into the family home.



● **Question: What challenges are there in explaining a welfare report to the child?**

- It can be hard to gauge a child's understanding.
- Some children need extra help in order to understand the report.
- Practitioners are not always trained to do this.
- The child needs to be kept informed every step of the way, so there are no nasty surprises.
- The report may contain some information that the child should not see.
- The child's emotions can be hard to deal with.

● **Activities and resources**

● **We asked practitioners about the activities and methods they use with children. Below are some suggestions:**

- Role play
- Puppets
- Therapeutic play
- Quizzes
- Identity work, 'me' books which are art based
- Give children a disposable camera and ask them to photograph something which shows an emotion or how they feel.
- Board games
- Get children to look in the mirror and pull different facial expressions, and ask how do you feel?
- Cartoons
- Art i.e. Draw the parent that isn't there
- Ice-breakers
- Soft play
- Family trees
- Poetry
- Music
- Messy playroom
- Educational Needs Audit. Use as a tool for discussion, there is a scale of 0-10, at ten you're feeling the best you ever can, and 0 the worst. The child needs to figure out where they can be happy at, and where they can't go past, and put a 'no-entry' sign there. Then work at staying in that area, of say 4-7.
- Computer programmes
- Websites