An Evaluation of the Empower Families Project 2017-18

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June 2018

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Project Overview

1. This report presents findings from an 18-month evaluation of the 'Empower Families' project. This project, funded by the Big Lottery Fund, is the first of its kind in London and enables Safer London to provide holistic support to families affected by child sexual exploitation (CSE). The project provides three dedicated Support Workers for parents/carers with children and young people identified as at risk of, or experiencing CSE in three London boroughs: Croydon, Hackney, and Waltham Forest. Support workers are able to offer three months of support including one-to-one sessions and facilitated workshops for parents/carers where they are able to learn and meet others undergoing similar experiences. During the evaluation period, 69 parents/carers received one-to-one support from a support worker. The project also provides educational sessions to professionals with a primary goal of helping other professionals understand how to work more effectively in partnership with parents/carers when CSE has been identified as a risk to their child/young person.

2. The evaluation sought to examine the effectiveness of the Empower Families (EF) project currently operating in three London boroughs and to identify learning points following the implementation of this relatively new project.

Given the diverse range of services provided by EF, the evaluation involved mixed methods and drew upon multiple sources of data for the purpose of establishing common themes regarding strengths and limitations across the service.

3. The evaluation adopted a realist action research design (Westhorp, Stevens, & Rogers, 2016), which combines action research with a realist evaluation approach, enabling project workers to solve problems as they arose, analyse current challenges, and work alongside the researcher to prioritise and refine ideas for future change. Data for the evaluation included: one focus group (n=9 parents/carers), interviews with six parents and three young people whose parents were receiving support from the Empower Families project, project evaluation surveys from 42% (n=29) of parents/carers who received support services during the evaluation period, training evaluation forms for 42 professionals, and notes provided by professionals who attended the four project meetings and engaged in a series of reflective free-writing exercises (n=21).

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Key Findings

4. Through EF project involvement, parents' knowledge of CSE and related risks increased, and they described feeling more able to engage with their children in a calm and boundaried way. Both parents and young people indicated that their relationship improved as a result of parents' involvement with EF.

5. Parents and EF support workers felt strongly that three months was an insufficient period of time to effectively support families with complex and changing circumstances. However, EF workers were able to develop trust with parents and demonstrated effective use-of-self in building strong relationships wherein parents relied on workers as both skilled experts in CSE and sources of emotional and practical support.

6. Interacting with the wider safeguarding system was a source of significant strain for parents who often felt marginalised, blamed, and disempowered. EF support workers helped parents navigate these systems, advocated on their behalf, and helped parents learn to advocate for themselves and their children in meaningful ways. In trainings with professionals, EF conveyed these messages to professionals who reported an increase in their understanding of parents' experiences and their knowledge regarding how to best communicate with parents.

1. BACKGROUND

Whilst the body of research on CSE has grown substantially in the past 10 years, there remains limited research on the experiences of parents (and other non-parent carers) who have a child that is experiencing CSE (Scott & McNeish, 2017) and much remains unknown regarding how to best support parents when CSE has been identified.

However, we do know that parents and families can undergo significant difficulty when a child is experiencing CSE. They may experience a decline in physical and mental health (Unwin & Stephens-Lewis, 2016), feel stigmatised and socially isolated, and experience strain in other family relationships (Shuker, 2017a).

In a recent review of the emerging literature on supporting parents of sexually exploited young people, Scott and McNeish (2017, p.5) identified four key areas that parents are most likely to need support:
1) their relationships with their child;
2) their own emotional needs;
3) dealing with systems; and
4) building their resilience.

2. EMPOWER FAMILIES EVALUATION

The evaluation of this new project was small-scale and exploratory, and began shortly after the Empower Families project was initiated. Findings are based upon the views of parents, young people, support workers, and other professionals who interact with families affected by CSE (see Table 1). The evaluation received ethical approval from the University of Sussex Research Ethics Committee. Interviews were conducted with parents and young people whom the Empower project staff (including both parent support workers and young people's advocates) had risk assessed and identified as appropriate for the study. Once a parent or young person had been identified and provided preliminary verbal consent, they were contacted by the researcher who ensured they understood the purpose of the research and had been provided with the information letter and informed consent documents. For the semi-structured interview schedules, see Appendix A.

Table 1.

Data source	Number of participants	Borough
Survey	29 parents	15 Croydon 9 Hackney 5 Waltham Forest
Interview	6 parents 3 young people	Croydon (2); Hackney (4) Croydon (2); Waltham Forest (1)
Focus group	9 parents/foster carers	Croydon
Professional trainings	58 professionals	Hackney (42)
Reflective writing exercises	21 total written pieces from multi-disciplinary professionals who attended research project meetings	
Researcher's project meeting notes	Four research project meetings	

2.1 Data Collection

The evaluation was initially designed as an action research project, involving the EF practitioners and managers along with multi-disciplinary colleagues from their respective boroughs (i.e. social work and police). Action research is collaborative and emancipatory, providing space for people across professions and experiences to contribute and influence the direction of research. This approach requires critical self-reflection, which is done individually and collectively such that people involved in the work can make public their own learning. The primary outcome of action research is learning in, and through, action. To engage with the EF teams and their agency partners, four project meetings were planned throughout the life of the evaluation. These meetings were originally envisaged as 'Action Learning Sets' where practitioners could share ideas and work through problems or issues they faced. While changing membership within the meetings made following typical Action Learning Set protocol challenging, some of the underlying principles were maintained throughout such as treating group members as equals and ensuring group members had space within the group to reflect on issues in practice they would like to address. The group also provided feedback on research materials, helped to shape interview schedules, and collectively made decisions regarding data collection strategies.

The researcher acted as facilitator, taking detailed notes at each meeting for circulation and discussion during the following meeting. At the first meeting, it was decided that subsequent meetings would begin with a reflective writing exercise to enable practitioners to reflect on key themes raised during the prior meeting or in the research. Specifically, practitioners were asked to respond to questions such as:

1. How is involvement in the Empower Families programme changing or shaping how you understand the "problem" of CSE?
2. What are you learning about the wider problems that families affected by CSE face, such as systemic oppression and injustice?
3. Could you describe how 'the system' looks from the perspective of parents, carers, and family members of young people who have experienced CSE?
4. A woman in a focus group said that her experience as a mother to a young person who has experienced CSE has 'changed who I am'. How have you observed these changes amongst parents/carers/families in your work? You might consider both positive and negative changes.
5. What do you notice when you start to believe that the work you are doing with parents is 'working'?

We intended to collect data from parents via a series of focus groups held after parent workshops in each borough, however the workshops were variably attended and participants included foster carers generally interested in further training and parents who were new to the project, unable to contribute meaningfully to discussions about the impact the project had in their lives at that point. Thus, only one focus group was held and it was then determined that individual interviews and surveys would generate more meaningful data.

An online survey was developed but a very low response rate resulted in the decision to exclude it from the study, and instead, questionnaires filled out by parents/carers at the end of their involvement in the project were collected from support workers. The 29 questionnaires included in this evaluation represent 42% of the total number of parents/carers who received services during the evaluation period. Interviews were conducted with six parents (five over the

phone and one in person) ranging from 21 to 54 minutes in length. Three young people participated in brief phone interviews as well (16 to 21 minutes); two of these young people had parents who were also interviewed for the evaluation research.

Data from training evaluation forms provided by 58 professionals who attended trainings in Croydon and Hackney were also provided by the EF teams for the evaluation. Professional training is a key part of the EF project and findings will be discussed following an exploration of findings from parents, young people, and professionals working with, and alongside, the EF programme.

2.2 Data Analysis

The focus group and interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed for accuracy. Transcripts were entered into NVivo 11, a qualitative data analysis software package and a thematic approach to data analysis was used (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This approach to data analysis involves a process of generating initial codes and then identifying, reviewing and refining themes. In this instance, themes were developed inductively and based upon what is known from the research regarding effective parent support. Data from parent questionnaires, the focus group, interviews, practitioners' reflections, and project meeting notes are discussed together to enable cross verification of themes and identify instances in which there may be divergent views. Support worker names and locations are omitted and pseudonyms are used for both parents and young people to ensure anonymity. Findings from professional training evaluation forms are discusse separately.

2.3 Limitations

There are several key limitations to this evaluation. The evaluation took place over 18 months and thus, it is not possible to determine if the positive changes that took place during the short period of involvement with a support worker results in lasting change for the young person and their family. In addition, the data from parents/carers may represent those who were more satisfied with the EF project and thus willing to participate in the research via an interview or fill out a feedback form in their support worker's presence. Data collected for the project is primarily from two boroughs, and so may not accurately represent the work across all three boroughs. In addition, whilst this project represents the first of its kind to include young people's views of the parent support work, only three young people were identified and willing to participate in an interview; thus, findings may not be generalizable across all young people whose parents are receiving specialist CSE support work within the EF project.

3. FINDINGS

Parents who provided their views on EF via a project evaluation form and/or an interview had very positive experiences with EF project involvement overall. 82 percent of parents/carers who provided feedback forms indicated on a scale of 1-5 (1=not useful, 5=very useful), that being involved in EF was very useful (M: 4.79; SD: 0.50). On a scale of 1-4 (1=not at all, 4=yes), 80% said 'yes', the project helped the way they hoped it would (M: 3.79; SD: 0.41), and 100% indicated that they would recommend EF to a friend.

In the evaluation form, parents/carers were also provided with free space to describe what they originally wanted support with, the most important benefits to being involved with EF, and any improvements they had seen in their relationship with their young person since they began working with EF. Responses were relatively brief and easily categorised (see Table 2).

Table 2.

Open-ended Question	Response categories	Frequency
What did you want support with?	Daughter/child	15
	Education	15
	Emotional support	3
What were the most important benefits?	Education	15
	Emotional support	15
	Parenting	8
Comment on improvements you've seen in relationship with YP since starting.	Knowing how to communicate with young person	16
	Understanding how to meet young person's needs	7
	Strengthened relationship with young person	5
	Personal development and resilience	4

These survey responses will be incorporated into a broader discussion of parents' experiences and positive outcomes associated with EF involvement. This discussion is organised into three key themes:

- Parents[1] ' understanding of their children's experiences
- Parents' resilience and emotional well-being
- Parents' relationship with their support worker and the wider system

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[1] The word 'parent' will be used henceforth, for the sake of brevity. However, some focus group participants identified themselves as foster carers, and it is not known if any parent/carer evaluation forms were completed by foster carers.

3.1 Parents' understanding of their children's experiences

Parents' understanding of their children's experiences appeared to change through involvement in the EF project in several ways: They developed new knowledge of CSE, were able to normalise their child's experience, avoid blaming their child or themselves for harm caused by perpetrators, and identify new approaches to parenting that helped them connect and strengthen relationships with their children.

An interest in new knowledge seemed to be the most compelling factor in getting parents to initially engage with EF. In the evaluation surveys, parents described first seeking help for generalised support, advice, and a need to better understand CSE, gangs, social media, grooming, and peer relationships. Following EF involvement, one parent wrote, *'I learned a lot about CSE, I feel that I could even teach others from what I have learned.'* Whilst these topics were echoed in interviews, the term 'sexual exploitation' was only used by three parents across all interviews and the focus group, and parents were more likely to describe related risk (gangs, social media, grooming, and peers), and general concerns about parenting teenagers. For example, Nancy said:

So it was my first time having a teenager and I've just been totally unaware of what is going on in society. I mean you hear things on the news but I just really didn't have a real grasp of what the level of safeguarding which is needed for our children and so [support worker] very much came and brought that information.

What often stood out to both parents and young people were the tangible tools and activities that support workers gave them to use with their children, such as cards that helped facilitate difficult conversations. These tools increase parents' confidence that they could engage with their children in ways they previously found uncomfortable or impossible. One young person explained the importance of these conversations:

Parents, they need to open up more because if they don't teach us about sex and how things could go wrong during it and the consequences that come out of it at a young age then I feel like young people are just going to go out there and experment themselves.

In addition to gaining practical tools, parents gained confidence by having access to support workers whom they could solicit advice in specific situations. One mum, Sylvia, described calling up her support worker *'before I'd go and do anything'* and she felt able to call her whenever problems arose:

So I didn't know how to react in certain situations, like what I should tell her [daughter], and then I'd call up [support worker]...so that is how I actually used Empower, because I needed help in terms of how I didn't know how to handle it.

Practitioners welcomed this contact from parents, and in their reflective writings, some wrote about knowing that the work they were doing with parents was resulting in positive change when parents would willingly call them to share concerns and successes. They also noted positive changes in the way that parents could talk openly about CSE, felt proud of their knowledge and motivated to share it with others, and were able lay the blame for CSE onto perpetrators rather than themselves or their children.

3.1.1 Parent-child relationship

As parents developed a new understanding of their child's experiences, the relationship with their child seemed to change. Most interviewees described a reduction in arguments and a growing confidence in their ability to confront their child, set boundaries to help keep them safe, and identify ways to strengthen the relationship. In evaluation surveys, 28 (97%) parents wrote about improved relationships with their child as a result of EF project involvement. These improvements were described as knowing how to communicate with them, understanding how to better meet their needs, and an overall sense that the relationship had strengthened as a result of EF project involvement. For example, a parent in Waltham Forest wrote *'I am more able to talk to my daughter about relationships, [our] relationship has been made stronger. Was able to deal with high pressure situations calmly which resulted in positive outcomes.'* In interviews, parents described feeling calmer, more relaxed, spending more time with their children, and making concerted efforts to show their child love and affection. Tania described this transformation, saying *'You just want to fight and you forget about the protecting... and you are not putting that cloak around your daughter to say, 'Come on, you have gone through this, let's try and sort it out'*. The metaphor of a cloak is one of warmth and affection, recognising the importance of connecting with her daughter so that they can 'sort it out' together. This change was evident in two young people's experiences as well, who described feeling closer to their parents, gradually rebuilding a relationship and finding new ways to connect:

My mum will come to my room and say like, "OK we are going out and we are going to sit down and talk and have girlie time and see if there is anything you need to talk to me about or I want to talk to you about or anything at all so we can just have that time together just to be out and in the open." And that is really, really good because it just gives me time to breathe...

Boundaries were also discussed as evidence of a changing relationship between parent and young people. Parents described learning to set new boundaries with their children, particularly in relation to arguments within the house. For example, Sarah described how her support worker helped her to set boundaries around physical spaces within the house so that both her and her daughter have time apart from one another and a space to go in the house where they can be by themselves and calm down when an argument gets heated. She was then able to say, 'I don't have to shout and scream and I can be calm. And I am a parent'. This brief statement evokes a sense of confidence, identity, clarity, and demonstrates how support workers are helping families to restructure relationships in a way that is functional and safe. This safety was felt by one young person who said that she knew her mother had changed as a result of working with an EF support worker because she is more *'understanding but also strict- which is good; it's better that she's strict. I wouldn't be allowed out as much but that was really cool because I would be allowed out with people that she knew and better friends.'*

The work around boundaries described by parents and young people aligns with principles of structural family therapy, which seeks to recognise the inherent capability of families to solve their own problems, identify rigid transactional patterns that get in the way of healthy growth, recognise how power and hierarchy are distributed within family members, and work collaboratively with families to find new ways that work for them (Minuchin, 1974). These principles of structural family therapy were also evident in at least two cases where support workers offered to help support and resolve parents' conflicts with one another and/or step-parents, so that parents could present a unified front for their child.

3.2 Parents' resilience and emotional well-being

Prior to EF involvement, parents described feelings of guilt, self-blame, nervousness, helplessness, powerlessness, isolation, and a lack of confidence. Parents in the focus group also discussed, very powerfully, how having a child experience CSE fundamentally changed who they were as a person. One mum explained:

It changes who you are completely because we get anxious about everything; when she goes out, when she's at home, who is going to attack her? Especially when dealing with gangs, we get threats, prank calls. And also we are more nervous. So I think parents and the professionals who are helping the parents should be more aware that the parents are affected equally, same like the child is going through...our emotions change;

we are not sure of anything at the moment, you know, what they would be going through, the peer bullying and are they safe on the bus, are they safe in school? It changes everything.

Professionals' reflective notes from project meetings indicate an understanding of the significant impact this experience has on parents as well, including parents' feelings of helplessness and recognising the power of perpetrators over caregivers who are 'victims-by-proxy'. In the discussion that followed one reflective writing activity, practitioners spoke empathetically about remembering that that parents *'live it 24-7'*. They recognised the intensity of demands placed upon parents to gather evidence, build/re-build a relationship with their child, change parenting practices, protect other children in the home, and address their own personal problems (such as feeling triggered due to their own past abuse); several recalled instances in which they observed parents' mental and physical health decline. They spoke about how parents can easily lose their identity (e.g. *'I've seen parents become this 'CSE person''*) and become one-dimensional in the system. In the focus group, parents recognised this as well, expressing a desire that other professionals remember they are *'trying to deal with this as humans'* and as such, to remember their humanity and individuality in the process.

Parents' experiences in this project echo prior research (Unwin & Stephens-Lewis, 2016), and align with Scott and McNeish's (2017) recommendation that programmes supporting parents should focus on building their resilience. The EF project support workers helped parents develop resilience in three key ways: By providing emotional support; empowering parents to safeguard their children; and reducing isolation, shame, and stigma.

Half of parents who filled out evaluation surveys indicated that one of the most important benefits of EF involvement was emotional support of some kind (Table 1), described primarily as being heard and understood. In interviews, parents described feeling able to be honest, express their feelings, regain confidence and self-worth, and develop a sense of direction and purpose. They described how support workers made them feel empowered, encouraged, and able to recognise their own strengths as parents. Ada said, *'She encourages me...and it is like I get strength from her encouragement'*. Sarah described her feelings before becoming involved in EF, saying that she *'would just curl up into a ball and sit back and let it happen...[now] I am more up front and more shoulders back and stop that happening...now I feel I am back in control'*. Sarah's experience indicates how parents are able to regain a sense of parental identity through the support work and may be more likely to effectively engage in safeguarding their child both in the home and alongside statutory agencies (Shuker, 2017b).

Support workers also promoted parents' emotional wellbeing by working to combat isolation, shame and stigma. Sometimes these feelings were referenced explicitly when parents described wanting to hide what had happened from families and communities, or when they felt misunderstood or disempowered by other professionals. Other times, these feelings of stigma and shame were conveyed implicitly when they spoke about wanting others to know that their children did not come from 'a broken family' and they (as parents) did not take drugs.

These feelings were shared by two of the young people interviewed for the project who felt that professionals often approached working with young people and their families with preconceptions about their capacity for change and their experiences within a family:

I think a lot of professionals think that if your child is going through so much or there are many problems with the child that the upbringing of the child hasn't been very good. And I mean in some homes that may be the case, but you can't tarnish everyone with the same brush.

Support workers were able to reduce parents' feelings of isolation, shame, and stigma through their non-judgemental interpersonal styles and by facilitating peer support sessions where parents are able to 'share views without feeling judged', 'understand that we're not alone', and 'other people out there who are going through it as well'.

These feelings of shame and stigma may have been particularly complicated for parents whose own life experiences mirrored their children in some way, as was the case for a few interviewees in this project. Practitioners were aware of this and reflected on the ways in which they worked to address this by incorporating direct work sessions to meet parents' needs (for example, *'doing work around violence against women with mum'*) as one aspect of helping to improve parents' overall emotional wellbeing.

3.3 Parents' relationship with support worker and the wider system

Support workers' relationships with parents were instrumental in enabling parents to begin developing both resilience and the confidence to parent and safeguard their children whilst facilitating more positive connections with the wider 'system', including children' services, criminal justice, and education systems. When parents described support workers, they referenced close positive relationships, feeling as if their worker was a trusted friend and someone who was skilled, knowledgeable, non-judgemental and containing. Support workers demonstrated excellent use of self2 as several parents described how their worker's personality, demeanour, and life experience played pivotal roles in facilitating their trust.

Both parents and workers acknowledged the importance of the support worker role in being flexible and available, as parents often needed workers to be available to talk on the spot, when they needed it most. For example, all six interviewees spoke about the importance of flexibility, and provided multiple examples of when they had contacted their worker to ask for advice when they were unsure how to respond to their child. Tania explained:

I could call them in case of problems happening. So I didn't know how to react in certain situations, like what I should tell her, and in that sense then I'd call up [support worker] and I explained the situation and then she would say, "Okay, when she comes back this is what you need to do."

Support workers also offered parents help in understanding the complex system(s) their children were likely to become involved in when experiencing CSE. One parent, Sylvia, explained that her family had not come to the attention of children's services before her daughter was sexually exploited. She relied on her support worker to help her understand whom she should speak with and when she should reach out for help:

I had a go-to person and I could ask, 'What should I do? Should I actually call the police? Should I call social services? It was almost like I had a reference point I had where I could just pick up the phone and speak to a person.

Several other parents spoke about support workers passing on concerns and accompanying them to meetings (e.g. at school).

During one project meeting, members wrote about how 'the system' looks from the perspective of parents/carers and family members of young people experiencing CSE. In both their reflective writings and the discussion that ensued, professionals indicated that families face significant barriers when they are thrust into a system that is confusing, contradictory and daunting.

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2 Use of self in practice refers to the way in which a worker combines knowledge, values, and skills with their personal self- personality, life experiences, culture, and beliefs (Dewane, 2006).

Several members described parents as 'faceless' and their situations as impossibly complex due to the sheer number of professionals that parents are expected to interact with. Examples included:

- A parent who does not speak English was sent a letter in the mail (in English) inviting her to attend a meeting that she was unable to attend because of her work schedule. Professionals then described her as lacking sufficient engagement.
- Parents who have lost their jobs because they were required to attend multiple meetings scheduling during daytime working hours.
- Parents who began to feel overwhelmed by the process and then disengage entirely, believing that there is nothing they can do to help their child.

One member wrote: *'The current child protection proceedings aren't the right structure to support the young people or parent/family as CSE often is out of the home and a large focus of child protection is in the home'*. These professional observations, along with parents' own experiences, provides a clear case for ensuring support like EF continues and hopefully expands, particularly as we become more aware of the ways in which young people are at risk of home outside the family home (Firmin, 2017).

3.4 Professional trainings

Another key way EF sought to improve families' relationships with professionals in the wider system was through the delivery of trainings to professionals working within this system. To evaluate the impact of these trainings, project workers provided a sample of the evaluation forms collected from 42 professionals at the end of two training sessions, in March and July 2017. A paired samples t-test was conducted to compare professionals' self-reported knowledge on the topic of working with families affected by CSE before and after the training. There was a significant difference in the scores before (M=3.14, SD=.90) and after (M=4.36; SD=.62) the trainings; t(41)= -9.69, p < .000, indicating that their knowledge had significantly increased.

Professionals evaluated other aspects of the training highly (see Table 3), with a majority indicating that they feel more confident to work with families effected by CSE. When asked to identify key points of learning, the most commonly referenced areas of learning related to understanding what CSE is (including the revised statutory definition of CSE) and the importance of language used with, and about families where CSE risk is identified. Approximately one-third (31%) referenced the former and 43% referenced the latter in their feedback. Professionals also spoke about learning about the impact of CSE on parents/carers and the importance of working with them to safeguard their children.

Table 3.

Question	Response categories	Mean; Standard Deviation
How relevant did you find the content of today's training?	1= not relevant 5= extremely relevant	4.52; .51
How effective was the facilitator?	1= not effective 5= extremely effective	4.37; .62
How confident do you feel after this training to identify risk factors in young people?*	1= not confident 5= extremely confident	4.33; .49
How confident do you feel after the trainings to incorporate what you have learnt into your practice?	1= not confident 5= extremely confident	4.19; .66
Would you recommend this training to others?	1= not at all 5= yes, definitely	4.53; .67

This question was only present in 15 evaluation forms

4. DISCUSSION

This evaluation offers emerging support for the EF project, including both the direct work provided to parents and families and the professional trainings. The project was regarded highly by professionals, parents, and young people in this study. The holistic approach to working with professionals and parents enabled parents to communicate better with both their children and other professionals, while professionals who receive training felt more competent to communicate with parents and young people as well.

The direct work with parents formed the core of service provision for EF, and support workers were effective as a result of four interrelated factors: Warm and engaging interpersonal styles; a sound knowledge base and effective educational tools; a remit that allows them to be flexible and available when parents need it most; and an understanding of the safeguarding system that young people and their parents/carers struggle to navigate. These factors enable EF support workers to facilitate parents' understanding of CSE, their emotional resilience, and their capacity to safeguard their children. This approach aligns with what Shuker (2017) has called the 'virtuous circle' of empowering parents (see Figure 2).

Figure 2. The virtuous circle of empowering parents (Shuker, 2017)
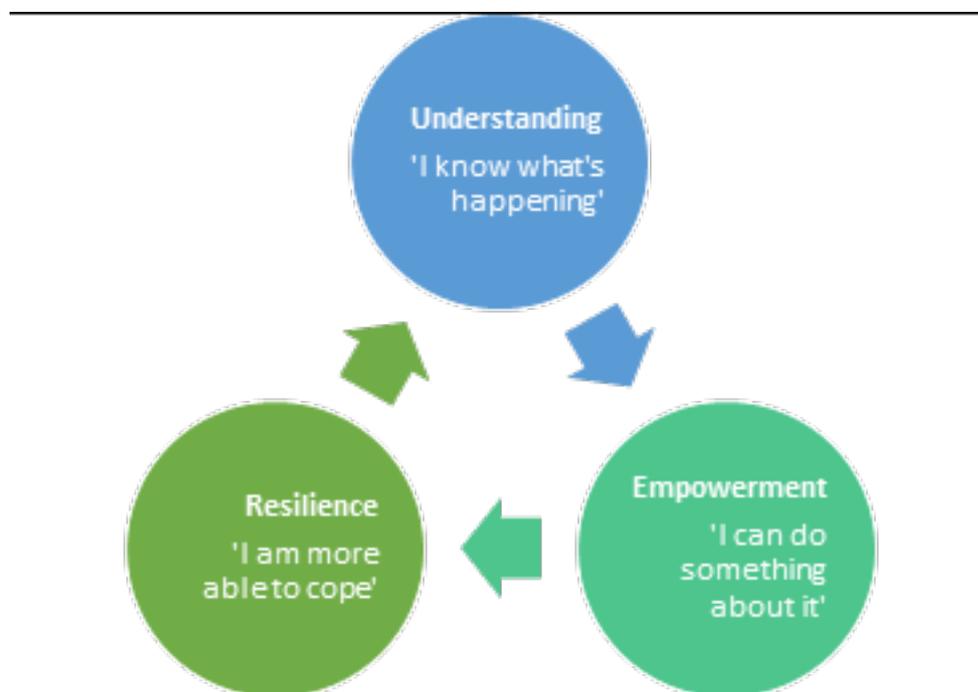
The concept of a virtuous circle comes from behaviour confirmation theory (Snyder, as cited in Shuker, 2017), which explains how our expectations of people- and our treatment of them- can lead them to react in ways that confirm our original beliefs about them. This concepthelps us understanding how

professionals' beliefs about parents can ultimately affect young people; if professionals believe in parents' ability to safeguard their children, they help create a context in which parents themselves feel more competent and able to do so.

The EF project seems able to create an environment where this virtuous circle might thrive. Throughout the evaluation, parents, professionals, and young people described how information about CSE was shared to parents, and parents utilised this information to change parenting practices. They set boundaries, found new ways to communicate, and saw relationships with their children begin to strengthen. Parents relied on support workers to give them advice whenever they needed it, and professionals saw changes in parents as they grew in confidence and developed more effective ways to communicate with other professionals. Parents also described how involvement with EF helped them to develop resilience, regaining a sense of identity as a parent who cares about, and can protect, their children.

4.1 Recommendations

Both parents and professionals felt that the timeframe support workers have to engage with parents should be extended. They are currently limited to 3 months' work and given the complex nature of CSE victimisation, it seems advisable that this timeframe is extended or made flexible to accommodate ongoing support needs. Currently, EF is facilitating further engagement by allowing parents to continue attending weekend peer support sessions as a participant or, in one instance, as a featured speaker. Whilst this seems to be an excellent and cost-efficient way to offer extended engagement, it may not be sufficient for many parents and families with more acute needs.

As the project continues, it may also be beneficial to consider developing a process whereby parents can provide anonymous feedback on their experience with EF; currently parents provide feedback on a form that they give directly to their worker which may inhibit them from providing critical feedback. However, when critical feedback was solicited during the focus group and interviews, parents only criticisms related to the time frame (i.e. too short), the need for EF to be more widely publicised, and many wished they had EF support when their child initially came to the attention of statutory services.

A third recommendation comes from a project meeting with professionals, when it was noted that some of the educational tools developed by the workers were not widely shared or centrally stored. Given how highly parents spoke of these tools, it would be advisable to ensure that the rich knowledge based established by EF's support workers is not lost, and a mechanism for capturing and storing these tools is developed.

Finally, research evaluating family support work in the context of CSE risk should continue. Whilst this evaluation identified promising practice, it also illuminated the ongoing difficulty parents have in parenting young people experiencing CSE, and the way in which community context and socio-political environment contribute to these difficulties. Future research is needed to better understand the impact of this wider context on parents' capacity to safeguard, and to understand how this work ultimately results in improved outcomes for young people (e.g. evidence of reduced CSE risk).

5. CONCLUSION

The evidence from this evaluation demonstrates that Safer London's Empower Families project is an innovative and valuable addition to the organisation, and to the wider landscape of service provision in Croydon, Waltham Forest, and Hackney.

The EF project is designed to meet the needs of professionals, parents, and young people, even in the face of complex and often overwhelming circumstances.

Through EF, parents are given knowledge, skills, and support that enhances their capacity to parent and effectively safeguard their children; they are supported to understand the safeguarding system, and professionals within this system are simultaneously trained to understand parents better as well.

APPENDIX A

Focus group/interview with parents
Interview schedule

Intro statement:

Safer London wants to know how the Empower Families project has been helpful to you and how they can make it better. I'd like to have a discussion about your experiences with the project so far, including what has worked well for you, what kind of help or support you've received, and what they could be doing better.
As a reminder, please avoid using people's names so that we maintain anonymity regarding others people's involvement (children, project workers, family members, and potential perpetrators) in your experiences.

1. Tell me about the Empower Families project
    a. Prompt: How would you describe the project?
    b. What is it's purpose?
    c. What does your involvement look like?

2. What does involvement with the project, and your worker, look like for you?
    a. How did you learn about the project
    b. How often do you meet or have contact- is it enough? Too much?
    c. Do you feel comfortable with your worker? If yes/no, why?
    d. Do you feel supported by the project /your worker? If yes/no, why?
       (seek very specific examples here)
    e. Have there been times you have felt unsupported?
       If so, what made you feel that way?

3. In your view, what should stay the same about the project?

4. What should change?

5. What do professionals need to know about the experiences of parents/carers and families affected by issues that you've talked about today?
    a. What about bigger issues like housing? Economic opportunity? Discrimination?

6. What have you learned about yourself as a result of being involved with this project?

7. What have you learned about your child/children in your care as a result of being involved with this project?
    a. Their experiences
    b. New ways of connecting
    c. New approaches to parenting

8. Is there anything else you'd like to say?

Individual interviews with young people
Interview schedule

Intro statement:

Safer London wants to hear your views on how the Empower Families project has been helpful to your parents/carers and how they can make it better.

1. Tell me about the Empower Families project
      a. How would you describe the project?
      b. What is it's purpose?
      c. What does your _____ (parents/carers) involvement look like?

2. In your opinion, is a project like this- one that provides support or help to parents or carers and not directly to the young people, a good idea?
      a. If yes, why?
      b. If no, why?
      c. If you don't think it's necessary in your case, would it be useful to others?

3. Have you noticed any changes in _____ (parent/carer) since they started working with an Empower Families worker?
      a. If so, what (seek out specific examples)?
      b. If not, what kinds of changes should a young person expect to see?

4. What do professionals need to know about helping or supporting your family?
      a. Stereotypes?
      b. Challenges?
      c. Needs?

5. What do parents and carers need to know about young people's experiences of sex and relationships that maybe they don't understand very well?

6. Is there anything else you'd like to say?

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