

The Baby in the Room: Analysis of clinicians recorded observations of infants' experience of family contact in out-of-home care

Rebecca Bennett,

Berry Street Take Two & Student Researcher, University of Melbourne

117 Wills Street, Bendigo 3550

rbennett@berrystreet.org.au

Dr. Jean Paul, Primary, Murdoch Childrens Research Institute, University of Melbourne

Associate Professor Campbell Paul, University of Melbourne & Royal Childrens Hospital

Dr. Nicole Milburn, Supervisor, Clinical Psychologist in Private Practice

Aim: This research aimed to explore and analyse how clinicians observe and document the infants' experiences of spending time with a parent when residing in out-of-home care.

Method: This qualitative exploratory study used theme-oriented discourse analysis to explore how infants' (0-2 years) experiences of family contact is observed and documented by clinicians in case files. Infants were clients of the Berry Street Take Two service, an intensive therapeutic service for child protection clients. The research comprised two parts: analysis of written observations of infants during supervised family contact, and a focus group with clinicians to explore their experience of observing and documenting these observations of infants during family contact.

Results: Main themes identified within the case notes included: observing infants' affect and behaviour and monitoring change, noticing the infant in the context of interactions with the parent, and exploring how clinicians interpret infants' cues and the dyadic interactions. Clinicians often used discourse markers such as qualifiers, to seemingly reduce their epistemic certainty around statements. Findings from the focus group supported this hypothesis. Focus group findings also highlighted how, in order to capture the infant's experience, clinicians felt it was important to include the overall context and describe in detail the infant's expressions and actions.

Conclusions: Through observing the infant during family contact, findings revealed that infants' experiences can be illuminated and mentalized so as to understand the infant in the context of the parent-infant relationship. This research highlights some of the uncertainties of clinicians in recording the infant's own experience of family contact. From this research, Take Two is developing a practice framework for observing infants and a clinical tool for capturing and analysing the infant's experience to record observations in a medicolegal client file, guide clinical work, systemic advocacy and promote child-centered decision making.