

THE WINSTON CHURCHILL MEMORIAL TRUST OF AUSTRALIA

Report by – SALLY RHODES – 2011 Churchill Fellow

An intensive study on how to reunify abused children home to their families with rigorous safety when parents deny the abuse – United Kingdom

I understand that the Churchill Trust may publish this report, either in hard copy or on the internet or both, and consent to such publication.

I indemnify the Churchill trust against any loss, costs or damages it may suffer arising out of any claim or proceedings made against the trust in respect of or arising out of the publication of any report submitted to the Trust and which the trust places on a website for access over the internet.

I also warrant that my Final Report is original and does not infringe the copyright of any person, or contain anything which is, or the incorporation of which into the final report is, actionable for defamation, a breach of any privacy law or obligation, breach of confidence, contempt of court, passing-off or contravention of any other private right or of any law.

Signed

Dated

Index

1. Introduction	page 2
2. Acknowledgements.....	page 7
3. Executive Summary.....	page 9
4. Programme.....	page 10
5. Main Body.....	page 13
5.1. Direct Observations of the Work.....	page 15
5.2. Themes from Families and Helpful Adults.....	page 17
5.3. Input from Social Workers.....	page 23
5.4. Input from Judges.....	page 29
5.5. Input from Solicitors.....	page 30
5.6. Input from Children’s Guardian.....	page 32
6. Conclusions	page 34
7. Recommendations.....	page 35
References.....	page 37

Introduction

Imagine this: baby Joe, aged 8 weeks arrives at the emergency department of his local hospital, brought in by his parents. He has a raised red mark on the side of his head with slight swelling and is presenting as floppy and lethargic. Tests are conducted and it is discovered that he has eight fractured ribs and a haematoma to his head. A paediatrician and forensic pathologist diagnose non-accidental injuries. The parents offer a number of explanations, including hugging him too hard, accidentally bumping his head on the side of the cot and an older brother playing too roughly. It is considered that these explanations don't support the medical evidence and baby Joe is placed in emergency foster care. The parents are arrested by the police and charged with criminal neglect. They continue to deny any involvement in the child's injuries and are at a loss to explain how the injuries occurred. There is no prior child protection history on the family and they appear to be genuinely perplexed about the situation.

Unfortunately this is not an unusual scenario and is one often faced by Child Protection workers. It presents many dilemmas. Working with a family where one or both parents deny culpability for the clearly evidenced and serious abuse of their child is one of the most challenging aspects of child protection work and one where good outcomes are often scarce.

I have worked as a Social Worker since 1985 and have been undertaking reunification work since 1993, with the past eight years in private practice. Approximately twelve years ago I became aware of an innovative approach to working with families previously viewed as untreatable. Termed the 'Resolutions Approach', it was developed by Susie Essex, Colin Luger and John Gumbleton all based in Bristol, in the United Kingdom. Since then it has been a personal goal to have the opportunity to meet with them and learn directly from them.

The taking of responsibility for the abuse of a child has been a cornerstone principle of child protection work and viewed as an essential precondition for change, yet the reality is that many, if not most, parents who seriously abuse their children do not admit to it. There are many disincentives to do so, not the least of which are the possibilities of criminal charges, the loss of relationships and employment and the enormous shame faced by parents. Denial of the abuse by the parents often quickly produces a stalemate in work with the family. The risk is that reunification may be ruled out, despite the family's wish to stay together. Alternatively, the child may be returned home to

unchanged and unsafe circumstances. Either way, the child suffers. There is strong anecdotal evidence that the inability to engage with parents is both a common reason for children who have been seriously abused remaining in care and alternatively for children returning home after the provision of an unfocussed and often inexperienced, scatter-gun style of intervention where the risk to the child remains of concern. (Nicolaou, 2004)

Another aspect adding to the complexity of this issue relates to the debate regarding the best place (or least detrimental) place for children to be raised. The choices are their biological family home, kinship care or alternative care, which includes foster care and various forms of residential care. Having had a long working history alongside of the alternative care system I posit that a natural family providing “good enough” safe care is preferable to any other form of care. Pringle, 1975, (cited in McCallum, 1992), states that “the child’s removal from home, no matter how adverse it is, represents the collapse of the world known to the child and the most damaging effect is on the growth of self-awareness and the development of a sense of identity.” In addition, the principles underlying the Children’s Protection Act, 1993, are that of the preservation of the family. It is desirable for children to be raised in their family of origin, if that is safe. The primary focus ought to be on working with the family to assess risk and build safety.

Solution focussed brief therapy approaches have been advocated as approaches to the child protection context encouraging workers to view the client as a pool of resources, rather than a collection of pathology and deficits. These systemic approaches have been helpful in achieving the development of meaningful partnerships with families, whilst at the same time maintaining a clear focus on child protection concerns, thereby achieving success where traditional approaches have failed to engage families in a change process. . Systemic models provide us with the tools to help unravel the complexity of the elements involved and to take account of relational factors, that is relationships within the family, and between the family and professionals. Gumbleton (2004) concedes that such a view is founded to some degree upon anecdotal rather than empirical evidence as family therapy has not been active in undertaking research regarding its effectiveness in child protection work. (Essex & Gumbleton, 1999; Hiles et al, 2008; Gumbleton, 2004)

The Resolutions Approach, with influences from solution focussed brief therapy, Post-Milan Systemic Therapies and Narrative Therapies (Essex and Gumbleton, 1999) has attempted to move past this impasse of denial with families to find innovative ways to successfully engage the family in finding safe solutions that do not insist on an admission of culpability. Further investigation into who committed the abuse is not pursued. A broader view of the needs of children and their families is taken in order to provide

effective help and support to enhance the child's welfare and protect them from significant harm. It is a deliberate shift away from problem analysis to focussing on family strengths and activating support networks. Coupled with this is the belief that supporting the parents and developing a working partnership with them and significant others is the best way of protecting children. (Essex & Gumbleton, 1999)

The Resolutions Approach is a risk management program which recognises that some questions about the child's injury or abuse may never be clearly answered. The aim is to accept this, then to manage the uncertainties in a way that is demonstrably safe for the child. The Resolutions Approach takes place within the context of the child protection arena and is often supported by ongoing court proceedings that provide a clear symbol of the seriousness of the concerns. The statutory authorities have to agree to move forward without an admission. Families are provided with incentives to complete the program; this includes moving from a stuck position where parenting their children is constrained by a high level of external supervision to one where they can regain control within a framework of safe behaviours understood and monitored by members of their support network. (Hiles & Luger, 2006) The family is compelled to develop a group of "helpful adults" around them from their network of family and friends. The importance of a wider family support network in child protection is well documented. If we are to protect children effectively professionals must understand the unique role that "insiders" to the family can take. They are in a position to identify concerns, over the lifetime of the child, unlike professionals who are involved sporadically and for limited periods of time. Additionally they are there to identify strengths and resources and can provide ongoing support and assist in sustaining change. (Pitcher & Arnill, 2010) As Insoo Kim Berg so aptly wrote "blood is thicker than social services". (cited in the foreword, Turnell & Edwards, 1999)

Instead of taking a position about the abuse, the Resolutions practitioners take the position of helping the family demonstrate to the authorities that what happened in the past could not happen in the future. The goal is to actively build future safety rather than focussing on past events.

The program may last from four to six months with reunification generally occurring two-thirds through. There are a number of elements to the program, beginning with an assessment and preparation stage where preliminary meetings are held with all of the parties to gain a commitment to participate. The engagement phase consists of one or two sessions where the workers begin to build a solid working relationship with the family.

Time is given to listen to their story. The workers demonstrate to the family that they have understood their experience and start to explore with them the alternate perspectives. (Turnell & Essex, 2006) Each stage of the work has to be successfully completed before moving onto the next stage.

A process called Words and Pictures Story Board is often completed with the parents. It is a tool that helps provide a coherent narrative to help children understand events that are difficult to talk about. The storyboard attempts to create a context in which meanings attributed to events can be shared. The words and pictures are shared with the wider support network and this forms the firm context for the future. Typically it is provided to the children when they have reached an appropriate age to assist them in making sense of what occurred in their early years. Family safety guidelines are developed with the family, the professionals and the wider support network. They are generally a work-in-progress and tested and refined as the family progresses towards reunification.

In order to discuss issues in relation to how children can be injured and what factors are likely to be present a 'Similar but Different Family' (SBDF), or 'pretend' family is utilised. This involves working in the hypothetical and the family members and members of their support networks are involved. They are encouraged to look at the issues from the respective points of view of the hypothetical family members and from the professionals involved. They are encouraged to express feelings which they might experience and to tell each other what might be going through their minds. These are generally run over four to five sessions. (Turnell & Essex, 2006) Appropriate members of the professional system (with families consent) are invited in to observe the work.

As the program progresses the parents are given increasing access to their children, with supervision being provided initially by members of the support network. The final phases include the development of a safety plan with the network and some final follow up from the Resolutions practitioner. (Turnell & Essex, 2006; Hiles & Luger, 2006; Essex & Gumbleton, 1999; Bentovim, 2003)

There is a strong focus on communication between the parents, the wider system and the professional systems and on checking the parent's levels of understanding about child development. The work is based on the assumption that children should be raised in their natural families if it safe enough to do so, but this way of working will never knowingly seek to put a child at risk of further significant harm and if there is doubt, caution will be the guiding rule.

It is not enough for parents and family members to just attend sessions – there has to be enough change during the course of the work for the Resolutions practitioner to be of the opinion that the risk of re-abuse is sufficiently diminished for the child in question to be safe in the family.

An evaluation of the Resolutions Approach when it was located with the National Society of the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC) found highly favourable results in terms of reduction of risk to children (ie re abuse rate of 3-7% of children compared to standard treatments which have a re abuse rate of 25-33% re abuse rate), and also reported favourable qualitative outcomes in terms of improved relationships and communication, parents feeling more protective regarding safety issues, better appreciation of the seriousness of the concerns, being more aware of the children's needs and an improved couple relationship. (Gumbleton, 1997)

Acknowledgements



John Gumbleton and Colin Luger



Margaret Hiles and Susie Essex

The time I was able to spend in the United Kingdom undertaking this study was only made possible by the willingness and generosity of Colin Luger and John Gumbleton, (Resolutions Child Protection Consultancy, Bristol) and Margaret Hiles (Child and Family Solutions, Child Protection Consultancy, Bristol), (pictured above). They put an enormous amount of effort into making connections for me, facilitating travel and meetings, talking with me about their work and opening their work up for me to observe. I would particularly like to thank Colin Luger who took the lead role in the organisation and made sure we were all updated regarding my schedule. I am extremely grateful to them for their enthusiasm and generosity towards my learning experience.

I would like to thank and acknowledge the many professionals who met with me along the way and gave generously of their time, knowledge, expertise and wisdom; including Susie Essex, Sarah Medley, Carol Jones, Sarah Byrom, Margaret Huber, Professor Elaine Farmer, Sue Harrop, Dr Peter Dale, Gillian Hall, and Dr Kirstin Lean. I also met with two County Court judges whom I am unable to name, they however know who they are and I wish to express my appreciation for their candour.

Most importantly I would like to thank the families. Those families who allowed me into their lives to observe the current work being undertaken by Colin and John. They were all open and welcoming. I would like to make a special mention of the families and their support networks that had completed their work with Colin and John, who opened up their homes to me and provided me with rich and insightful descriptions of their experiences. They were all very willing and motivated to talk with me in the hope that their input would have some ongoing benefit for families in Australia.

I would also like to acknowledge my own support network of helpful adults, particularly those who have continued to support me in my work; my referees, Anne Nicolaou and Rob Croser whose advocacy, I have no doubt, assisted me in obtaining the Churchill Fellowship, my work colleagues and friends Deb Pickering and Sarah Gray, who carried on the work for me while I was away, my Churchill Fellowship mentor, Julie Dini who was readily available in times of crisis, and my personal support system, Gerard, Grace, Deb, Mary and Gavin who maintained continued contact with me during the six weeks. Thank you. A special thankyou to Janette Knox who stayed with me during parts of the fellowship, who travelled with me all over the United Kingdom and provided a much appreciated ear for when I would return from my interviews.

I will be forever grateful to the Churchill Trust for providing me with this opportunity.

Executive Summary

Sally Rhodes
PO Box 3073, Port Adelaide. South Australia. 5015
Social Worker: Connecting Families (Private Practice)
Phone: 0407598815/0882427600

An intensive study on how to reunify abused children home to their families with rigorous safety when parents deny the abuse – United Kingdom

Highlights

- Visiting and interviewing four families who have completed a Resolutions Program.
- Meeting with Susie Essex the practitioner who developed the approach alongside of Colin Luger and John Gumbleton.
- Observing directly the work of Colin Luger and John Gumbleton and having long discussions with them about the approach.
- Being able to immerse myself into the study without the distractions of day to day work- it was very indulgent and extremely fulfilling.
- Meeting with professionals to gain a broader perspective including two County Court Judges, three Social Workers, two Solicitors, and one Children's Guardian who had previous exposure and/or involvement with the Resolutions Approach.
- Meeting with the following academics, researchers and practitioners, Professor Elaine Farmer, Dr Kirstin Lean, Dr Peter Dale and Margaret Hiles.

Major Lessons Learnt

- The need for thorough assessment regarding suitability of families for Resolutions.
- Clearer understanding about how to approach the work, the value of structured time frames and particularly how to set up and approach the Similar but Different Family scenarios.
- The importance of the statutory worker being present during the sessions
- The need for child protection workers to be exposed to and trained in the approach
- More resolute about the value of this approach in child protection work for certain families.

Where to from here: Implementation and Dissemination

I feel more confident after the fellowship to implement Resolutions more into my work and to train and mentor colleagues. Ongoing collaborations with the Bristol based Resolutions Practitioners will allow for future training possibilities for interested practitioners in Australia. The profile of Resolutions as an effective approach needs to be lifted. I will organise talks with organisations associated with Child Protection such as Families SA, Child Protection Services, Care and Protection unit, Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services, the Centre for Child Protection and through talks at the Universities to Social Work students. Most importantly I feel discussions with the judiciary in the Youth Court of South Australia and with Solicitors located within Court Administration and Crown Solicitors Office needs to occur.

I will attempt to disseminate information about Resolutions through the Media.

Programme

I was based in Bristol from 23/4/12 until 1/6/12.

Colin, John and Margaret are based in Bristol but work with families all over England and Wales. They travel to meet with the families either in their own homes or in the offices of the Solicitors. I therefore spent the majority of my time travelling to other locations meeting with families, Social Workers, Solicitors and Judges.

Week 1

Was spent in Bristol meeting with:

- Susie Essex;
- John Gumbleton;
- Elaine Farmer, Professor of Child and Family Studies in the School for Policy Studies at the University of Bristol;
- Sarah Medley, a Social Worker from the Bristol Local Authority;
- I also observed a court matter (not child protection) to get an understanding of the operations of the County Court.

Week 2

- Met with Colin Luger;
- Viewed training DVD developed By Susie Essex, Colin and John in 2006;
- Travelled to Cardiff, South Wales to sit in on session with a current family with John. The Local Authority Social Worker and their helpful adults were present;
- Travelled to Ealing, London to sit on a session with a current family and their helpful adults. The Local Authority Social Worker was present. John did part of the Similar but Different Family Scenario.

Week 3

- Travelled to Cornwall with John who was undertaking an initial assessment with a family. Met with their “helpful adults” in a separate interview to the parents;
- Met with Margaret Hiles – Child and Family Solutions, Child Protection Consultancy, Bristol;
- Travelled to Crewe and met Ms Margaret Huber, Children’s Guardian and Sue Harrop, a Solicitor, both of whom had experience in working alongside Resolutions;
- Travelled to Winsford and met with a Social Worker from, Cheshire West Local Authority;

- Travelled to the midlands and met with a County Court judge;
- Travelled to Warwickshire and met with a family who had completed work with Resolutions.

Week 4

- Travelled to Hastings in Sussex to meet with Dr Peter Dale;
- Travelled to Caerphilly (South Wales) with Colin for an initial assessment of a family;
- Met with Elaine Farmer.

Week 5

- Travelled to Birmingham with Colin and met with Social Workers from the Solihull Local Authority to discuss a referral;
- Met with Ms Gill Hall, a Solicitor in Bristol who had experience working alongside of Resolutions both as a Solicitor acting for the child and for the parents;
- Travelled to Penarth, South Wales to meet with a family who had completed work with Resolutions. One of their helpful adults was present for the interview;
- Travelled to Swansea, South Wales to meet with a family who had completed work with Resolutions. Two of their helpful adults were present for the interview;
- Met with a Social Worker from the Swansea Local Authority who had experience of working alongside of Resolutions;
- Met with a County Court judge who has had extensive experience of the Resolutions Approach;
- Attended Supervision with Colin and John.

Week 6

- Travelled to Essex to meet with Dr Kirstin Lean who has completed a Doctorate in Clinical and Community Psychology, University of Exeter. Her paper is titled "Creating Family Resilience? The Support Networks Experience of Participation in the Resolutions Approach". Dr Lean interviewed families and their support networks as part of her research;
- Met with Margaret Hiles; Child and Family Solutions, Child Protection Consultancy, Bristol;
- Met with Sarah Medley and viewed a television documentary, made by the BBC about the Bristol Local Authority called "Protecting our Children";
- Travelled to Sheffield to sit in on a current family with John. The Local Authority Social Worker was present as were their helpful adults. John introduced the Similar but Different Family to them;

- Travelled to Dover with Colin and met a family who had completed work with Resolutions. Interviewed their extended family also;
- Skype conversation with Susie Essex.

Main Body

Why travel to the United Kingdom and Why Resolutions

A gap in service

In 2004, Anne Nicolaou, Principal Social Worker in Families SA wrote a paper titled “A Proposal for a pilot program of a *Resolutions* therapeutic service for families who deny the serious abuse of their child”. Ms Nicolaou recognised a gap in service delivery within the South Australian context and commented: *“There is currently no publicly funded specialist therapeutic service that can be relied upon to provide therapeutic intervention specifically to families where serious abuse and denial co-exist.”*

Ms Nicolaou added: *“There is potential to successfully reunite more families who under current arrangements do not have access to skilled specialist intervention for this particular client group. It can also be presumed that some children are returned home and re-abused who could have been better protected by sound risk assessment based on the outcomes of skilled therapeutic intervention. A publicly funded Resolutions program would help fill this void. Such a program would be a cost effective solution to children remaining unnecessarily in care, being re-abused upon return home and re-entering care, or use of services at private practice rates”.* (Nicolaou, 2004)

Eight years on, the situation remains the same and alarmingly more children are entering our alternate care system. Figures obtained from The Australian Institute of Family Studies show that nationally the number of children entering out-of-home care has risen every year over the last 10 years, almost doubling (a rise of 97%) from 2002 to 2011. In South Australia (SA) the figures reflect the national trend with 2368 children in care in 2011 compared to 1,196 in 2002. More disturbing however is that in SA we have close to 15% of those children living in non-home based care, that is independent living (1.1%) residential care (10%) and other (3%) which this writer assumes is emergency accommodation for children. The national figure for non-home based care is 6.9%, with SA and the NT (Northern Territory) having the highest proportion of children placed in non-home based care. I am also aware that a large proportion of these children in non-home based care are babies, toddlers and young children. Whilst I recognise that the Resolutions approach is not going to be a panacea for the enormous problems in our alternative care system I do believe that it provides an opportunity for children to safely remain at home who might otherwise enter the already overstretched care system.

The Signs of Safety Approach, which was developed in the 1990's by Andrew Turnell and Steve Edwards in Western Australia has integrated parts of the Resolutions Approach, such as the Words and Pictures and detailed Safety Planning, however does not integrate the Similar but Different Family scenario's (SBDF), which is the part of the approach that I find most challenging and most useful for working with families who deny the abuse of their child. In order to explore the use of the SBDF and talk with families who have experienced this; I needed to go to the original theoreticians and practitioners. I also felt it necessary to watch and learn from these very practiced and experienced clinicians. Colin and John have completed a Resolutions program with approximately 120 families since moving into their private consultancy in 2000. They have received more referrals which did not proceed after their initial assessment due to a number of factors, including, unsuitability for a Resolutions program, work undertaken by other agencies after their assessment, court rejecting the assessment or lack of resources available to fund the program.

Their outcomes are very good. Colin has completed his own analysis of his cases since 2000 and has reported the following:

52 cases of full *Resolutions* programmes in public law matters (where the Local Authority had initiated proceedings);

8 cases of part *Resolutions* programmes in public law matters (where the Local Authority had initiated proceedings but a full programme was not needed);

41 public law matters where viability assessments were completed, a work plan was set out and the work undertaken by other agencies;

73 public law matters where viability assessments were completed and it was not deemed viable to proceed;

11 public law matters where viability assessments were completed and it was deemed viable to proceed but the Court then said no to the proposed further work;

11 private law matters where *Resolutions* work was done in respect to contact issues and contact then took place into the future;

5 consultations (to other workers, including co-working with Margaret Hiles on 2 cases);

11 public law matters where a viability assessment was completed and said "maybe" (but they were not then proceeded with);

2 cases where Resolutions advised fathers in private law (contact disputes) as to a possible way forward however they were not proceeded with;

1 case where the parents withdrew from the proceedings.

In terms of the re-abuse rates, there were 3 cases (out of the 52 completed programmes) where the children were subsequently removed. Parental learning difficulties were present in two of these cases.

60 cases worked with in Resolutions programmes to the necessary degree, the breakdown therein being as follows:

46 cases of physical abuse (86 children, 49 harmed originally);

10 cases of sexual abuse (20 children, 3 of whom were sexually abused in these families);

1 case of emotional abuse (1 child).

2 cases of neglect (4 children).

1 case of factitious induced illness (2 children, 1 harmed).

Total children = 113.

2 families where re-abuse occurred, involving 3 children.

Re-abuse rate over all categories and all children: = 1.8%.

Re-abuse rate in physical abuse category by children: = 1.2%.

Re-abuse rate in physical abuse category by cases: = 2.2%.

Re-abuse rate in sexual abuse category by children= 10%.

Re-abuse rate in sexual abuse category by cases: 1 divided by 10 = 10%.

Overall re-abuse rate: 60 cases, two where re-abuse occurred = 3.3%.

5.1: Direct Observations of the work

I was able to directly observe Colin and John work on seven separate occasions. Six of these were direct work with families and one meeting with Social Workers from the Local Authority. I took note of their questions and was able to reflect on what influenced their line of questioning. My direct observations of Colin and John working confirmed that although they have different styles and use different methods and tools, (such as setting up the SBDF scenario's differently, or the use of Colin's "Stress Scale") the outcomes reached are the same. Largely this is due to the attitudinal stance they take in their work, their calm approach

and their ability to work alongside of the families in a respectful, non- judgemental way, without losing sight of the seriousness of the issues.

In the assessment phase they methodically and carefully went through with the families a list of questions and areas to cover and clearly described what the ongoing work would look like. They were interested in looking at the wider family and friends, who is around to support them and what level of commitment they felt these people were likely to have. They were clear about the future expectations of the family and their 'helpful adults' if the work was to continue.

They both described to their families that during the course of the work they would need to discuss how children are injured (in similar ways to the way their child was injured) and look at this from the perspective of family members, from the child's perspective and from the Social Work/court perspective. This was done in a detailed, clear fashion using simple jargon-free language. What I noticed most was that Colin and John were interested in the fine detail of what the 'helpful adults' would be doing to support the family, and were very clear and up front about the expectations of direct, rigorous supervision throughout the various stages of the work. They also asked questions of the families about their understanding of what would happen should another injury to a child occur.

It was my view that the families understood what was expected of them, were willing to engage, and were prepared to commit to what was asked of them. They also articulated that for the first time they felt a sense of hope about the future. They saw that Resolutions was a way through what seemed an impossible situation.

My observations of the families in the later stages of the work were that they were very engaged. They would be all gathered and waiting for the arrival of the worker and ready to begin the session. They participated and contributed to the sessions and it was evident that they had thought about the issues raised in previous discussions.

I visited a young mum and her partner who were in the final stages of the work and had their children reunified home with ongoing support from their helpful adults. She told me that the Judge in their case stated to her that unless she admitted to what she had done that her children could be adopted out. She stated that he said, "They were white, young and very adoptable". She said she was horrified. She stated that she would have done anything to get her children home and prove that they were safe. She believed that if not for Resolutions her children would have been adopted.

5.2: Themes from the families and their helpful adults

I visited four families who had completed their work with the Resolutions practitioner. They all allowed me to audio tape them which has provided me with the opportunity to report their own words in this report. I also met with Dr Kirstin Lean who has completed her Doctoral Thesis in Clinical and Community Psychology at the University of Exeter. Her paper is titled “Creating Family Resilience? The Support Networks Experience of Participation in the Resolutions Approach.” Dr Lean interviewed families and their support networks as part of her research.

I found that Dr Lean’s findings concurred with my anecdotal evidence. A link to Dr Leans research can be found below.

<https://eric.exeter.ac.uk/repository/bitstream/handle/10036/3395/LeanK.pdf?sequence=5>

I did not go into the interviews with a prescriptive list of questions; rather I asked them generally what their experiences were and then let the conversation flow. I did however explore the following in each interview:

- How the overall experience was for them;
- How they found the Similar But Different Family Scenario;
- What advice they would have for families in Australia about undertaking the work;
- Were there any unexpected benefits (other than their children being returned) that came out of the work for them.

The Overall experience

Every family expressed that going through the court system and being involved with Social Services was “hell”. They said that their children being injured and what ensued was the worst experience of their lives.

“The court situation is horrible, you are sat there and people are talking about you and there is nothing you can do.”

All were adamant that without Resolutions their children would have been adopted or remained in kinship care. One stated that it was *“our last hope as we had no other option”*.

“Without someone like John, without a company like Resolutions there would have been nowhere to go at that stage” (after the findings made by the Judge in the County Court that the child was injured whilst in the care of the parents).

“Because we had this issue that (parents named) were both saying that they weren’t responsible for the injury the only way forward , the only way to get her back home was to bring in Resolutions.”(Comment from a grandparent)

“I honestly think that without Resolutions there would have been no obvious way forward.”.

All of the families and their helpful adults were extremely positive about the experience of working with the Resolutions practitioners, despite initial scepticism and fear.

One family reported that they found it *“nerve wracking”* at first but then John clearly explained to them what would happen over the ensuing sessions.

“I couldn’t see what John could do to turn things around, I’ll be brutally honest, I couldn’t see how it was going to work.”.

“We were sceptical at first thinking ‘oh no, not another program’. But it was really eye opening once we got into it; it was working and really helping us.”

“At first we couldn’t see how it would work then everything started to fit into place, things started to make sense.”

All expressed that they were given hope, did not feel judged, felt supported, felt listened to and felt respected. They all commented that no assumptions were made and they could start afresh with the workers. They all saw it as a way through a very *“stuck situation.”*

Other comments included:

“I felt it was common sense.”

“We felt trusted.”

“It gave us a voice.”

“It instilled confidence.”

“We owe everything to the programme.”

“We both found it very rewarding, at times very emotional and very raw, but there was a sense of achievement at the end of each session.”

“We are both very grateful and it’s tragic to think that there are families out there who may not have the chance to work with it.”

“You start to realise things about yourself that people don’t tell you, that you haven’t known, and you get to work on it.”

“There were things that you could finally tell people that you didn’t want to before, bit like therapy really.”

“He saw the people instead of the paper.”

One helpful adult commented *“John was very calming, non-accusatory. He was very straight though”*.

“He very much believed in the structure around them, they had a big team around them.”

(Comment from a helpful adult)

The parents reported that *“it was really nice”* to have the team around them. They stated that they knew they were there to help them and didn’t feel that they were there to watch them.

“It was good to see what people had to say about our relationship in a controlled environment, everyone could talk.”

The families talked about the high level of participation from everyone and that John and Colin ensured this occurred.

“Everyone participated, John ensured that.”

“Everyone gave an opinion.”

“All the questions Colin asked us he asked everyone else in the group, the helpful adults, it was expected that everyone would participate.”

The families talked about the positive experience of having the notes from the sessions written up and sent to them either before or at the same time as being sent to the professionals.

“It was brilliant, we got them the same night or the next day. It felt like we had more of an input into the actual procedure.”

“Sometimes throughout the process you haven’t known what the group are talking about, our solicitors, their solicitors, the Local Authority, your left out of the loop so to speak, in this John sent them to us first, saying this is a record, a summary of what we talked about. So for the first time it felt like we had some control of the process, for the first time ever. It was a relief really.”

Comments in regards to understanding the Words and Pictures were positive although some reported how emotionally difficult it was. They all reported understanding the purpose and believed in the usefulness of it for the child. All said they wanted to find the right time to explain to the child in the future.

"The words and pictures was hard, emotionally hard, but a good way to put it down."

Another family talked about developing the Safety Guidelines and commented *"we made up most of the safety guidelines; it was easier to do them ourselves."* They also felt that by doing this they had more ownership over them rather than someone imposing them onto them.

Another family commented when working on developing plans for reunification, *"what was nice was John asked (husband) and myself to write down what we thought. We knew our day to day practice."* They commented on feeling they had an experience of really working in partnership.

Similar but Different Family (SBDF)

I talked with the families about their experiences of the SBDF scenario with the assumption that they would have reported how challenging and difficult it was. I couldn't have been more wrong. I will let the families speak for themselves.

"The pretend family was great, because we could take ourselves away from the situation and not feel like we were being attacked."

"It also put our Social Worker in the mind frame of what the parents are going through. The Social Worker could understand our position and how secluded we felt."

"We could have input. If it's relaxed you can say what you think. It dawned on us that this is how families work, we were not unique."

One grandfather commented about his scepticism regarding the SBDF to begin with and not seeing how it would work. *"I thought it was a bit daft but I found myself really getting involved in the pretend family, it works, it's amazing. You know yourself it's a pretend family but you get into it."*

"I found the whole process really, really good. It was quite emotional at times, bringing thoughts and feelings back up, but it was very helpful."

"Everyone who did the pretend family embraced it and took part in it."

"You're asked your opinion on things and given the opportunity to say what we think they would be feeling. We had never been asked our opinion on things, we were asked 'what did you do', 'How did you do this', so for the first time we were asked our opinion. We weren't being treated as a suspect; we were being treated as an individual offering an opinion on something. For me it was quite a big turning point."

"It makes you think doesn't it."

"We went through every process really, everything possible that could happen."

"It works your brain."

"At the start it was a bit weird but once you got into it I really enjoyed it, it does make you think."

The families were involved in co constructing their pretend family with the worker and they all commented on the effectiveness of this.

"It was good to be involved in it."

"Felt part of the process, rather than it being imposed on you. I wouldn't have felt that we owned it as much."

Three of the families stated that the Social Workers from the Local Authority attended some of the SBDF and they expressed how useful this was. They commented that the Social Worker could see the work they were doing instead of reading about it could hear how they were communicating with one another and see how the process was working. They also commented that it would also have been useful for the Children's Guardian to be present. The family whose worker didn't attend expressed that it would have been useful.

"It would have been nice for them to see the work, see how we were communicating to family and to others."

Any advice to families in Australia.

The families I met with all expressed to me that the reason why they had agreed to meet and talk with me was because they wanted families in Australia to have the opportunity to work with Resolutions. Their comments were remarkably similar in that they all expressed how it requires effort, commitment and openness.

"Take as much out of it as you can because it really changes your life."

"Grab it with both hands, go for it, give it a whirl."

"You have got to be willing to want to change."

"I don't think it would work for everyone, it's got to be certain situations."

"You have got to put the effort in as well, if you can't be bothered, they won't do it."

"Got to have a high level of commitment", not just the parents but the helpers too."

"Do it, it saved our family."

Unexpected benefits

Whilst the families acknowledged that working with Resolutions was their only hope in having their children returned, they also expressed to me that other, unexpected, but positive outcomes emerged from their participation.

The experience of feeling respected and trusted assisted them in feeling more confident.

"He opened doors for us, the confidence he instilled".

One family commented *"the advice from John and his intervention helped us with how to grow a relationship with our parents and her sister"*. They went on to say that their whole family had reconciled.

Another family commented on the development of trust, not only with professionals but in every day relationships.

A helpful adult commenting about the father in the family stated, *"he had to trust, he had no choice. But it worked out beneficial for him to trust, in the end it helped create a friendship and helped him to trust other people along the way."*

The father commented that he is *"now willing to talk to people"* and he could already see benefits for his children from this change.

Another family whose child lived with the grandparents prior to Resolutions and through the process commented about the child's contact with the grandparents currently saying, *"We love it the most because he is comfortable there because he lived there, they can take him on holiday next year and we know he will be ok, he is so comfortable with them."*

All of the families commented on feeling supported by their helpful adults and having developed close connections with them.

One young mum whose father was one of the helpful adults and lived with them for many months commented. *"It brought me and my dad really close"*. She acknowledged that they

had times of conflict but *“they had to work through the tensions because the alternative was to lose the child”* (comment from a helpful adult). They also said that the work had a positive impact on her father who stated recently that for the first time in his life he has realised that relationships are more important than anything else.

5.3: Social Workers from the Local Authority

I met with two Social Workers from Local Authorities who had both only had one experience each of working with Resolutions. Both expressed initial scepticism about Resolutions mainly because they didn't know much about the approach. They expressed pessimism and anxiety particularly being the worker on the ground.

What was their scepticism about?

Their initial scepticism related to not having been exposed to the approach in the past, the seriousness of the issues and not being able to see how the approach could work.

“It sounded wishy washy.”

“I took some convincing about the Resolutions Approach; I never come across it before. We saw the recommendations from the Psychologist but I didn't have the contextual understanding about it. On paper it felt a bit woolly. The role plays sounded a bit twee. I couldn't see it, I couldn't visualise it.”

Another worker spoke about her worries regarding the helpful adults.

“One of my main concerns at the beginning was about where the helpful adults had come from, that they had been plucked out of the air. After meeting them I was very reassured by them. They were very child focussed.”

What changed their view?

A number of factors contributed to the workers shifting in their view about the approach.

The Resolution's worker's professionalism and experience.

“Once Colin gave evidence about it in court, I thought yeah, go for it.”

“He brought it to life about how it would be.”

“It was very different seeing it on paper to seeing it come to life.”

“He was very clear that he wouldn’t undertake the piece of work unless it was going to be of value. He wasn’t just doing it for the sake of it. He was clear that he has to know that the family is going to engage with it and work with it.”

“We need practitioners to be credible, able to talk clearly about risks and not follow through if it is too risky.”

What else did the Resolutions Workers do that made a difference?

“Colin was very simplistic in his language.” The worker meant that Colin avoided jargon and spoke in a way the family members understood.

“It felt kind of therapeutic in the way his style was in delivering it. It felt like group work where everyone was feeding into it and he was managing that process. He was very approachable, very calm. He asked a level of questions to provoke that reflection.”

“The sessions are really intensive, a lot of work and homework, it’s not something that the parents can go into quite flippantly it’s something that they really have to focus on and plus the helpful adults, they have got to be involved in all of it.”

One worker commented that she believed the family felt that they had been listened to and this made a big difference

The Social Workers talked about their observations of the process and how helpful it was for them to be invited into the process to participate. They both had a lot of contact with the Resolutions Practitioner throughout, via phone calls and emails.

“Unless you have worked it on the ground it is very hard for other people to understand how it works.”

One worker attended as many sessions as she could and stated that this helped her see firsthand how it was working. She felt that it was very beneficial to be actively involved. This also had a positive impact on her relationship with the family.

“The parents invited me in to the home, I felt like I got to know them as people and as parents. It is very intensive and time consuming but for me that allowed the parents to build a better working relationship, and one of trust”. This worker commented that it was important for her to get to know the family unit and how they function.

One worker appreciated being involved and described it as a very *“joined up”* approach which made the experience all the more positive.

The Social Workers both commented about the Resolutions Practitioner being very upfront about how they were going to work, about being structured and that structure being predetermined by the Resolutions worker.

"The Family Safety Guidelines were good because it involved everyone in the process so everyone was clear about expectations and ground rules. They all bought into it because it was clear and structured."

"It was set at the pace Colin set and the family couldn't engineer this."

"I thought the Family Safety Guidelines were really good, they are very explicit."

One of the workers didn't attend the Similar but Different Family Scenario sessions but received the write ups and could see the work that had gone into this by the parents and their helpful adults.

One of the workers did attend a Similar but Different family session and commented that it was extremely helpful to witness this. She was able to see family members challenge each other and hear things she would not have been privy to otherwise. It gave her a much better picture of the family and what issues they were grappling with.

"I think the father initially found it hard to understand how the process would work and was very superficial to begin with , but as others bought into it he did a bit more."

In regards to the Words and Pictures:

"The family support worker got involved in it. Again when I first heard about it I thought it was a bit woolly, but when it was actually done it was done totally age appropriately. The parents didn't shy away from the process. It was a concern of the Children's Guardian that the father would shy away but he didn't."

"There was an expectation that no one would shy from it when the children raised it and wanted to know anything. There was a shared ownership of supporting the children with it."

In one of the cases the Social Worker has been left with the task of following up and finalising the Words and Pictures with the children. She had a relationship with them and felt more than capable of undertaking this.

One worker commented on the time frames and the need for the fortnightly gap between the sessions for the participants to reflect on.

"The parents and supports initially thought they just having to attend every fortnight and do this thing. I saw many of them questioning themselves a lot more, in terms of their own parenting, their own beliefs really. It made them question everything. Once they got fully involved in the process it wasn't like that because the work carries on their heads in between. What their expectations are carry on, their discussions with the family carry and will do now that we are long gone."

"I don't think they had anticipated the emotional impact on themselves."

Workers noticing changes in the family

One worker commented that she found it really helpful that the parents were open with her about what was going on day to day during the reunification, both good things and difficulties. She felt this was made possible because she had taken the time to be involved and build a relationship with them.

"I've seen a massive shift in the parents."

"I was happy bouncing with the whole progress with the family and watching how at ease these children are."

"I think the process helped the family and friends to reflect on what had happened. They still maintained support to the family but I believe they thought more about what happened."

"They had a very supportive group of family and friends who tried to convince me that they were a nice family and the workers were being cruel and unkind. I think they all got it in the end and I think they enjoyed doing the work. They were all very committed."

"I think it planted some seeds of doubt for the family and friends". In making this comment the worker was making the point that if the family and friends had some doubts they would be more vigilant in their support and protectiveness of the children.

One worker stated that although the child protection issues were serious, she felt confident about the children being home. *"It was serious stuff and I hadn't lost sight of that but the education they have had has moved them on to a very different place."*

Outcomes

Both workers stated that there were good outcomes from the work. In one case the Order on the children has been discharged and in the other there is a Supervision Order in place but the children have remained safely at home.

"Those children have got the best deal ever out of it because they got to stay in the family."

"When the fight had gone out of the issue they saw us as being supportive."

One worker stated that knowing what happened was not going to make any difference to how this moved on. She was able to see that safety could be built without having an explanation about how the injury occurred.

"I look at this and think at some point or other we were twin tracking for adoption, before this and I think, Oh my God if these children had of been adopted this would have been a travesty."

What are their views about Resolutions now?

Both workers were very clear that Resolutions was an effective approach for the right families, stressing that it *"wouldn't work with all families."* They would both definitely use it again if they considered the family had the right *"ingredients."*

"I think you need a fair level of intelligence to work with the program, so I don't think it is going to be a model for everyone."

One of the workers described the family she was involved in as follows:

"They didn't fit the profile of our usual families, they were middle class, educated, had not come under our radar before, model family, proactive, everything in terms of parenting was spot on."

Both workers stated that to be actively involved was very time consuming and required an investment from them.

"I think it's about managing risk. It wouldn't work with every family. You have to have the right parents and the right abilities to work through the issues."

One worker said that they could pin point families that would definitely not be suitable, but there would be some they were unsure about and in those cases it would be beneficial to seek an outside opinion from Resolutions. Then there are ones you can see it could work for.

"I think they really have to buy into it."

"Some families wouldn't get why they had to do role plays."

“Some of our families would struggle to have a network and have the level of understanding required.”

“It has reignited a bit of a spark, because you do all of this child protection work, a lot of crisis work and not enough preventative work with families.”

Could they use Resolutions in their work?

“I certainly think I could identify cases that would benefit from the actual program or something similar.”

Do you think if you saw a case come along again you could do some of the work yourself?

“I did carry on some of the work with the helpful adults after Resolutions finished.”

“Yes but we would need to get in there quicker because we delayed so long with this case.”

“My Manager and myself at the time said this is really good we should be doing this, we should be piloting this, but time/resources, it wasn't possible.”

One worker talked about the skill level required stating *“that just seemed a skill that I didn't have at that time. I don't doubt that some Social Work practitioners could do that, with some support.”*

However there was acknowledgement about the difficulties in engaging therapeutically with a family that you have had an investigative role with previously. *“Even if I had that skill at that time the family's level of hostility to me it wouldn't have worked. But I could offer it to families who don't have that kind of relationship to me.”*

She talked about the possibility of specialist services being located within Local Authorities.

One of the workers was employed in a Local Authority that was having ongoing Signs of Safety training and she felt that being exposed to Signs of Safety was *“making us think about things and react to cases very differently to maybe what we would have ordinarily done.”*

The approaches are very similar and the worker was able to see that stepping in to some of the practices of Resolutions is not a quantum leap, but a comfortable step.

“For all the work I have ever done, to me it was the most useful piece of work for that particular family, for that particular case and I would certainly want to embrace elements of it to use if not even the whole programme.”

5.4: Input from the Judges

My conversations with the Judges from the County Court focussed on their general view of Resolutions as an effective intervention, what factors they would be looking for in families that would be suitable for Resolutions, and what factors they considered would preclude families from Resolutions. I was also interested in any concerns they had about Resolutions.

They were talking from their own personal perspective in relation to cases that appear in front of them in their respective Courts.

Both Judges felt that for the right family it was an effective intervention, but stressed it is not an intervention for everyone and a thorough assessment needs to be undertaken.

Profile of a typical Resolutions family

- A single issue basis, that is one isolated injury;
- All other aspects of parenting/care is appropriate;
- No cognitive difficulties;
- No learning difficulties;
- Have had some exposure to child caring before the injury occurred;
- Need a framework to build on in terms of parenting, so therefore the need for some evidence of a background of positive parenting;
- Can manage the intrusive nature of the work;
- Has a reliable support system;
- An experienced and reliable practitioner.

Both Judges commented that they are relying on Resolutions to assist them in making decisions so therefore they need to trust in the reliability and credibility of the practitioner and the efficacy of the approach.

Both Judges felt that issues such as current drug and alcohol use (if that impaired the parent's cognitive ability), chronic mental health issues and domestic violence would preclude a family as the time frames required to address such issues are too long in the life of the child.

One Judge commented that they would not use Resolutions in cases of sexual abuse as the risks were too high.

In regards to any concerns they had in relation to Resolutions their general comments related to time frames which is not as relevant in the South Australian Jurisdiction.

5.5: Input from Solicitors

I met with two Solicitors, Gill Hall and Sue Harrop.

Gill Hall, a Solicitor based in Bristol has represented both children, (as instructed by the Guardians) and parents in family court proceedings when Resolutions have been involved. Gill has had long term and extensive experience of working alongside Resolutions, dating back to its origins in the NSPCC.

Gill described it as a very helpful system in some cases. She felt that it worked best with parents who had a level of intelligence and who could demonstrate a high level of commitment, as well as garner together a support network.

Gill said that there seems to be a willingness from all parties to use Resolutions as a way forward otherwise *"I don't think it really works."*

Gill stated that initially people were very sceptical about Resolutions but over the years *"their reputations has grown and their work stands for itself. So the courts are happy to go with it with the right case."*

I asked Gill what her thoughts, as a Solicitor were in relation to Resolutions when there is a consideration of them being involved. Gill commented that if she was acting for the parent she might think it is going to be the only way for a child to return home and if she was acting for the child she would want to make sure that the child was not going to be placed at risk by it.

Gill stated that Resolutions are generally bought in after findings and when *"you are looking to see if there is any way you can rehabilitate."* If there was no Resolutions available Gill said she would possibly get a risk assessment from a Psychologist but that wouldn't fulfil the need as lots of people won't work with families where there is denial. Gill commented, *"there is nothing quite like it."* Gill remembered that when it first started parents had to accept the findings made by the court, but stated that there are lots of cases where there aren't any findings or the parents don't accept them. It is her understanding that Resolutions has evolved to be able to work with those families where no admissions have been made but rather it is the result of a contested hearing. Gill said in her role when acting for the parents she has to sell it to the client on the basis of it being their best opportunity to get their child back. She stresses how important it is for them to work with them and do the programme. Gill commented that *"you have to consider as the first option, can these children return home."* She also felt that when older children are involved their wishes are important considerations.

I asked Gill her views regarding cases where factors such as domestic violence, drug and alcohol and mental health problems were present and she stated that if there is acknowledgement that these issues are present and work can be done in conjunction with other services, work with Resolutions could be possible.

Gill stated that often the Local Authority is not always happy with the idea of Resolutions as they see the risk as too great. But sometimes they have to go with it if it has been put forward by the Children Guardian or a Psychologist or Solicitor.

I asked Gill what the parents report to her about doing Resolutions?

She stated, *"I think they find it difficult to understand that there is a need for the helpful adults, to find them and involve them in their difficulties."*

"If they feel they are working towards getting their children back then obviously they feel it's worthwhile."

In regards to the Similar but Different Family, Gill stated that if they hold the position that they haven't done anything they question why they have to do this. Gill stated that in her experience Colin and John have developed a way of explaining it to families where they do understand and they are able to work with them. The same applied to the Family Safety guidelines where sometimes the parents fail to understand why they are necessary but again the workers have a clear explanation that makes sense.

Gill stated that she might sometimes suggest Resolutions in her role of solicitor, because she knows what sort of risk assessment is going to be undertaken. *"In some cases the findings are so serious you know there is not going to be any possibility of rehabilitation, but in those cases where there does seem some possibility you might want to explore Resolutions as an option."*

Gill would receive reports from the sessions which she found very helpful.

In Gill's experience she hasn't come across situations where allegations of further abuse have emerged after children have returned.

Gill stated that she has *"seen them do tremendous work in very difficult cases."* Commenting that they work with the parents *"in a different way than the local authority. The work is in some ways a lot more challenging."*

Gill stated that in her opinion it works best with couples or when people want to stay together.

Gill also talked about a Private Law dispute between parents where Resolutions were bought into work with what was deemed to be an intractable contact dispute. One parent had stopped contact due to suspicions about sexual abuse however no findings were made. The parent continued to flout contact and eventually a Guardian was appointed and they suggested Resolutions. The parent gathered together a network and contact was reinitiated with the support of the network to facilitate the contact. It was her understanding that this was successful.

Sue commented that in both cases that without Resolutions the child/children would not have been returned to their parents. It was her opinion that because there was no agreed explanation about how the injuries occurred, that if not for Resolutions the court would have taken a “very cautious view”.

Sue, when representing the child was looking for a rigorous support system around the family.

In one of the cases she felt that the whole process “*gave the mother space to think about what happened and why and this intellectually and emotionally helped her*”.

Sue stated she thought it was a “*very good approach, however, very lengthy, very time consuming and very expensive.*” But she went onto to say that “*it was not expensive as opposed to a child staying in long term care.*”

Sue suggested that a lot of Judges don’t know a lot about the program therefore it isn’t used as much as it could be.

5.6: Input from a Children’s Guardian

Children’s Guardians are qualified in Social Work who are trained and experienced in working with children and families. They are appointed by the Court to represent the rights and interests of children in cases that involve Social Services. They are independent of Social Services, Courts and everyone else involved in the case. They are generally employed by the Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Services (CAFCASS), whose role is to safeguard and promote the welfare of children involved in family court proceedings. They are there to make sure that children’s voices are heard and their needs are met.

I interviewed Margaret Huber, a Children’s Guardian who had worked with Resolutions on one occasion and had been involved in an assessment where it was determined that the family was not suitable for a Resolutions approach.

Margaret commented it was her experience that Social Workers in the Local Authority were of the view that without an explanation about how an injury has occurred that it was unsafe to return a child home. She commented that Resolutions *“enables you to look to see if that assumption should be made in every case or whether there is another way forward where you don't have a full admission.”*

In the case she was involved with Margaret attended one of the sessions with the family (when they were undertaking SBDF) which she stated was very helpful. She was able to see first-hand how the family and friends challenged the father in the family in regards to what had occurred.

Margaret saw Words and Pictures as very necessary for the children in the family and ensured that the children did get told. She felt without this process the actual story of what occurred could have been buried as a secret.

Margaret said that she *“nicked”* parts of the approach to apply to different cases. Such as doing things in a more *“group-work approach”*. By being exposed to it she had more *“tools to add to her toolkit.”*

One of the barriers for families in having Resolutions was social isolation and geographical isolation from family members.

Margaret saw it as expensive intervention but short term expense if the outcome is positive. She said that it is possible to get a false view about the expense as it comes out in one hit. Whereas the costs of children in long term care are absorbed, *“drip by drip”* and not so noticeable.

Margaret talked about current issues in the United Kingdom in regards to a recent review in Family Law Court and a suggestion that all work needs to be completed within 6 months. She stated that in her opinion that does not give time for work like this to be done. *“Because if you are going to do it, it needs to be done properly. Families need time to absorb, to think about, to reflect and to try things out, and they need space to do that”.*

Margaret stated that there are not enough relevant cases in any one Local Authority to bring it in house and therefore they have to buy it in.

6. Conclusions

There are a couple of key differences between the child protection system in the United Kingdom to South Australia. Firstly, the legal process in the United Kingdom is more protracted due to fact finding processes and secondly, it's a requirement for compulsory adoption where reunification fails. It was evident to me from talking with the families and the workers that there is more at stake for families involved in the child protection system in the United Kingdom due to compulsory adoption, therefore more court hearings are contested and often continue for lengthy periods of time. Here in South Australia, the Children's Protection Act allows for intervention to occur more expeditiously and with a lesser degree of hostility. It is in non-contested matters that we have the opportunity to get in and work constructively with families.

What became clearer to me during my time in the United Kingdom is that within the right families this approach can be highly effective, not only in building safety for children and keeping them out of long term care, when this it is unnecessary but also in bringing about real positive change to individuals and families. I suspect that the change process most occurs through the Similar but Different Family work. I have no research based evidence of this, simply a hunch. During my time away Kirstin Lean introduced me to the work of Brene Brown, a Houston based researcher who has done a considerable amount of work into shame and vulnerability. When we think about reasons why denial is present in child abuse we think almost immediately about shame. Brown believes secrecy, silence and judgement exponentially grow shame. If we think about general responses to child abuse there is generally a fair amount of judgement and a desire from families to be silent and hide from others what has occurred. Conversely, Brown also believes that empathy is the antidote to shame. It occurred to me that the Resolutions approach, particularly the SBDF scenario provides an opportunity for the family and their helpful network to experience empathy, to feel genuine support and to discuss otherwise secret and silent issues in a forum without judgement and without blame. At least this is what the families told me in all of the interviews. What is evident to me is that this approach works.

I had originally thought this was a therapeutic model for independent therapists (like myself); I now believe there is scope for it to be used by statutory workers, with training, mentoring and support. If a worker has the right attitude and can engage with families, can accept that they have to let go of seeking an admission, so many possibilities to work with families that would otherwise fall through the cracks and never have their children returned could be available. As one of the helpful adults commented they have "*got to have the right attitude in*

their head to do Resolutions, they have to be open minded.” Attitude is however born of skill which is the result of good training and quality supervision.

Several points came through loud and clear and were repeated in many of the interviews and discussions I had:

- The alternative outcome of adoption or long term kinship care if Resolutions had not been offered;
- The hit and miss nature of this. That is, families had been offered Resolutions because a Judge, solicitor or Guardian was aware of the program. Had this not been the case they would not have had the opportunity;
- The importance of thorough assessment of the viability of Resolutions being used and ongoing assessment throughout the program;
- The effectiveness of Resolutions with the “right families”;
- Mitigating factors such as learning difficulties, chronic drug and alcohol abuse, domestic violence and serious mental health issues that need to be taken into consideration when assessing viability;
- The value of working in the hypothetical with the “pretend” family scenario for families and for Social Workers in the Local Authority;
- The importance of the Social Workers from the Local Authority and other professionals witnessing the work;
- The value of time between the sessions for reflection;
- The possibilities about the use of the approach in Family Court/mediation matters.

7. Recommendations

- The profile of Resolutions as an effective approach to previously untreatable child protection dilemmas needs to be lifted. To raise awareness of the model I will organise talks with organisations associated with Child Protection such as Families SA, Child Protection Services, The Care and Protection Unit, Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services and the Centre for Child Protection and through talks at the Universities to Social Work students.
- I would hope that through these discussions managers, clinicians and caseworkers will take an interest in the approach and begin to think about how Resolutions programs can be more frequently utilised and how its concepts can be more broadly integrated into their work.
- I believe that discussions with the judiciary in the Youth Court of South Australia, with Solicitors located within Court Administration and Crown Solicitors Office, and with

independent solicitors and barristers who represent parents needs to occur. If they have knowledge about the approach then they may be in a better position to recommend (or even direct) a program of work for a family.

- Solution focussed, family centred approaches are Best Practice in child protection work and wide-scale implementation by statutory and therapeutic agencies would bring substantial improvements to client outcomes. (Western Australia's experience of the implementation of Signs of Safety is a case in point- see www.signsofsafety.net/westernaustralia) A Resolutions service, in this writer's opinion, operates best when statutory staff are already well versed and skilled in such approaches. One office in SA is currently piloting a Reunification initiative using a Family and Safety Centred practice approach which is influenced by Solution-Focussed Brief Therapy, Signs of Safety and Resolutions. It is hoped, and recommended that eventually all child protection workers in SA are well versed and skilled in solution-focussed approaches and that referrals are readily and quickly made to a Resolutions program wherever there is a stalemate with the family in securing the child's protection.
- My deeper understanding of the approach and a strengthened belief in its efficacy has contributed to my confidence in implementing Resolutions more into my work and to training and mentoring colleagues. I also hope that ongoing collaborations with the Bristol based Resolutions Practitioners will allow for future training possibilities for interested practitioners in Australia.

References

- Bentovim, A., (2003) Is it possible to work with parental denial? (Ch 14) In P. Reder, S. Duncan and C. Lucey (eds) *Studies in the Assessment of Parenting* Hove: Brunner-Routledge.
- Brown, Brene, "Listening to Shame", TED Talk March 2012 (Internet).
- Children's Protection Act, 1993, South Australia.
- Essex, S., Gumbleton, J., (1999) "Similar but Different" Conversations, *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Family Therapy*, Vol. 20, No 3: pp139-148.
- Gumbleton, J., (1997) "Untreatable Families? Working with denial in cases of severe child abuse". Dissertation for M.Sc., (Child Welfare), University of Bristol.
- Gumbleton, J., (2004) The re-unification of children in serious child protection cases, *Context*, no. 74: pp 2-5.
- Hiles, M, and Luger C., (2006) The Resolutions Approach: working with denial in child protection cases, *Journal of Systemic Therapies*, vol 25, no.2: pp24-37.
- Hiles M., Essex S., Fox A., and Luger C, (2008) The 'words and pictures' storyboard: making sense for children and families, *Context* no 97:pp10-16.
- Lean, K. (2011) "Creating Family Resilience? The Support Networks Experience of Participation in the Resolutions Approach"
- McCallum, S. (1992) Participative Case Planning: a model for empowering practice in statutory social welfare, *Children Australia*, Vol 17 No 1.
- Nicolaou, A. (2004) A proposal for a pilot program of a *Resolutions* therapeutic service for families who deny the serious abuse of their child, Department of Human Services, South Australia.
- Pitcher, David., and Arnill, Mabel, (2010) 'Allowed to be there': the wider family and child protection. *Practice*, Vol 22, issue 1: pp17-31.
- Scott, D., (2012) Children in Care Factsheet. Australian Institute of Family Studies.
- Turnell, A & Edwards, S (1999) *Signs of Safety: A solution and safety oriented approach to child protection casework*. W.W Norton and company, New York
- Turnell, A., & Essex, S., (2006) *Working with Denied child Abuse, the Resolutions approach*. Open University Press, New York.