

“Picturing family life: evaluating early years interventions
with homeless families through photography”

Ellie Byrne & Gabi Jerzembek. Cardiff University

The Early Years Family Team, part of the Flying Start programme within Cardiff, provides play sessions at three hostel/temporary accommodation sites in Cardiff, one-to-one and group parenting courses, and informal advice and support for parents. This research aims to explore family life for homeless families, elicit their perceptions of the family team, and inform its future development. Participants used disposable cameras to take photographs of ‘daily life’, and then took part in an interview with the researcher where the photographs were used as prompts for discussion. Data were analysed using a grounded approach to allow themes to emerge inductively from the data. Each theme was then inductively interpreted and over-arching discourses identified. Reasons for engaging with the family team included children’s unmanageable behaviour; boredom; responding to an invitation by play workers; and being referred from a member of the family team that the parent was already engaged with.

Parents’ perceptions of the service were that it is a multi-faceted, co-ordinated and co-operative service which does not end abruptly when families leave hostel / temporary accommodation. Parents were very happy with the demeanour of members of the family team and the way their children responded to them. Parents valued the opportunity for their children to play in safe yet ‘free’ surroundings and to interact with other children. Parents reported other ways in which the family team helped them: providing ideas for free family activities; opportunities to try new things; behavioural and developmental support; and providing information. All parents noticed positive changes in children’s behaviour which they felt were attributable to the family team. Practical tips and techniques were valued as long-term tools to manage children’s behaviour. Improved parent-child relationships and improved child development were also reported.

Homelessness impacted upon family life in various ways. Difficult home environments prior to moving into the hostel inhibited effective parenting. High mobility in this population was reported as a factor contributing to increased unsettledness in children. Housing policy and the process of being (re)housed was described negatively; some parents felt under-informed and unsupported. Parents felt more supported in hostel / temporary accommodation; but they felt more autonomous in their ‘own’ homes.