

# Service delivery Children and young people

## Fairer hearings for parents

### Winner: The Tavistock and Portman NHS foundation trust

A new approach to care proceedings for parents with substance abuse issues has kept more families intact. Janet Murray reports

**W**hen Emma\* found out she was pregnant, she was worried. After a family bereavement two years earlier, she had suffered a breakdown, developed problems with substance abuse and was having daily blackouts. She knew there was every chance her child would be taken into care soon after birth. "Everything had just spiralled out of control," she recalls. "I was worried that when my baby was born, I might just push him away."

Four years on, her substance abuse is under control and her son is thriving at nursery. But she knows things could easily have turned out differently. What made the difference for Emma was an innovative new approach to care proceedings for families with substance abuse issues, known as the Family Drug and Alcohol Court (FDAC).

The pilot project, run jointly by the Tavistock and Portman NHS foundation trust and the children's charity Coram, co-ordinates a range of services, including drugs and alcohol specialists, social workers and psychologists, to support parents through the process.

"We take the view that you have to focus on the parents first," says Sophie Kershaw, service manager at FDAC. "If you can tackle the substance abuse and any other issues parents might have, a positive outcome is much more likely."

Children typically form strong attachments with caregivers from around six to 18 months. It is vital, therefore, that decisions are made early about children considered to be at risk, so that they can either be returned to their family (if they have already been placed in local authority care) or, if this is not possible, more permanent arrangements, such as adoption, can be made.

Under normal care proceedings, parents attend an initial court hearing within weeks of

### Service delivery: Children and young people award

**WINNER: The Tavistock and Portman NHS foundation trust** in partnership with the children's charity Coram, for the Family Drug and Alcohol Court, an innovative approach to care proceedings for families with substance abuse issues that led to 39% of mothers being reunited with their children.

**RUNNERS-UP: East Cheshire NHS trust** for running hospital visit "practice" sessions to help children with disabilities to overcome their fear of going to hospital.

**MAC-UK** for working with other agencies and using youth-led programmes to promote positive mental health awareness in the community.

More on the runners-up on pages 17-19



The Tavistock and Portman NHS foundation trusts jointly run the Family Drug and Alcohol Court

the birth (or, in the case of older children, of a referral by social services). After that, many end up being bounced between social workers, health professionals and legal representatives while assessments are made about their ability to care for the child. "With so many agencies involved, there are inevitable holds-ups, and work can end up being duplicated," says Kershaw.

Under the FDAC model, parents are assigned a dedicated team of professionals who stay with them throughout the proceedings, to help them abstain from drugs and alcohol, and change their lifestyle, which might involve the parents undergoing intensive treatment or even rehabilitation.

One of the most difficult things for parents going through care proceedings is having to tell their story over and over again to health, social care and legal professionals. In the FDAC, not only is the same team maintained throughout but the judge also remains the same. At some of the hearings, parents can address the judge directly, rather than via their legal representatives.

"We have met parents who have been in front of 13 or 14 judges," says Judge Kenneth Grant, one of the two FDAC judges. "So being able to talk and explain their concerns can be hugely empowering. It creates a very different dynamic."

A recent evaluation of the project, carried out by a research team at Brunel University and funded by the Nuffield Foundation and the Home Office, found that parents who go through the FDAC are much more likely to control their misuse. Of the FDAC mothers studied, 39% were reunited with their children by the final court order, compared with 21% of the comparison group. Where parents could not control their substance misuse, it took on average seven weeks less for children to be placed in a permanent alternative family.

Families who are reunited after taking part in the programme attend a "graduation ceremony" where they are awarded a certificate. Seeing parents get to that stage can be "hugely gratifying", says Grant.

For Emma, who is now a parent mentor supporting families going through the FDAC, the project offered a lifeline: "Without that level of support, my son definitely would have ended up in care."

\*Not her real name

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