

Improving services to meet the needs of minority ethnic children and families

These briefings were originally funded through the QUALITY PROTECTS initiative. They are relevant to all practitioners and managers taking forward the *Every Child Matters: Change for Children* agenda.

Every Child Matters
Change For Children

Government policy aims to ensure that the needs of vulnerable minority ethnic children and families are identified and met by the provision of adequate and appropriate social care services. This briefing sets out key national service objectives, and the legal framework within which service provision must be organised and delivered. It examines the research evidence relating to families and children who may need help and support. And it argues that agencies must make concerted efforts to take into account cultural diversity and incorporate an understanding of race and racism in service planning and delivery.

The *Every Child Matters* agenda applies to all children and families regardless of race and ethnicity. The government's earlier initiative, *Quality Protects*, had already clarified the role of social services in helping minority ethnic children:

to ensure recognition of the needs of minority ethnic children and families with respect to provision of appropriate services, so that they gain maximum life chance benefits from educational opportunities and health/social care.

Local authorities are expected to provide information on the ethnicity of children in receipt of services. They are also expected to explain how these figures have been determined and provide details of any plans to improve access to services that are likely to influence positive change. In addition, authorities are required to provide evidence of activity and future plans for:

- making progress on the development and use of ethnic data
- ensuring that assessments take full account of race, language, religion and culture
- collecting and listening to the views of minority ethnic children and unaccompanied asylum-seeking children who are looked after.

This briefing uses the generic term 'minority ethnic' to refer to ethnic groups numerically smaller than the predominant ethnic white protestant group in the UK. This includes groups distinguished by their skin colour (so-called visible minorities), as well as white minorities including Irish, Jewish, Turkish. While the briefing focuses principally on those who have origins in South Asia, Africa and the Caribbean, it is hoped that discussion of race and ethnicity will help service planning and delivery to other marginalised groups.

THE LEGAL AND POLICY CONTEXT

Over the last two decades, a number of key legal and policy developments have attempted to ensure that public agencies develop adequate frameworks to address the needs and concerns of minority groups. In 1989, for the first time in the history of child care law, the *Children Act* required local authority social services departments to take into consideration a child's

racial, cultural, religious and linguistic background when making decisions about them (Section 22(5)(c)). This requirement was re-emphasised by the Adoption and Children Act 2002:

in placing the child for adoption, the adoption agency must give due consideration to the child's religious persuasion, racial origin and cultural and linguistic background.

In 1999, the MacPherson Report provided renewed impetus for public agencies to examine the extent to which their services respond to the needs of minority groups. The report's focus on institutional racism was instrumental in placing the onus on institutions to evaluate their policies and procedures, and to accept that they must be proactive in identifying and tackling the myriad and often subtle but unremitting ways in which minority ethnic groups are marginalised, diminished and rendered vulnerable.

The Race Relations (Amendment) Act 2000 strengthened and extended the Race Relations Act 1976 by placing on public authorities a new duty to promote race equality and race relations, as well as outlawing race discrimination in any of their functions, including the provision of services and facilities. And although limited in its analysis of race and ethnicity, the inquiry report into the death of an eight-year-old African child, Victoria Climbié, also re-focused attention on the importance and complexities of race and ethnicity in assessment, service organisation and delivery.

MINORITY ETHNIC FAMILIES

Research evidence over the last four decades has repeatedly documented the disadvantaged position of some minority ethnic groups in a range of areas, including employment, health, housing, education and social services. Many families from minority ethnic communities are living in 'severe and persistent' poverty. The impact of unemployment and low incomes on family life is extreme. The infant mortality rate is high among some minority ethnic communities, particularly those of Caribbean, Pakistani and Bangladeshi background. Minority ethnic families with a disabled child have lower incomes than their white counterparts and are less likely to be in receipt of benefits such as disability living allowance.

Minority communities' health experiences remain poorly understood. There is increasing evidence that some groups are more likely to suffer poor health than others. For example, Pakistani and Bangladeshi people are five times more likely to be diagnosed with diabetes than white people; East African Asians, Indians and Caribbeans are three times more likely. In addition to understanding the impact of parental ill-health on child care, it is also important to understand the health problems experienced by some minority ethnic children and young people, such as type 2 diabetes, sickle cell disorder and thalassaemia.

SOCIAL CARE RESPONSE

The response of social care agencies has been patchy, slow and incremental. Concern has focused on the geographical variability in use of and access to service provision, the adequacy of services and the effectiveness of service provision. Use and access have been long-standing concerns. Research evidence confirms that use and access are determined by a range of factors, including the general perception of social care agencies' abilities to meet diverse needs, familiarity with the range and nature of services, language skills, and the availability of appropriate services and personnel.

It is increasingly evident that families would like not only better access to existing services, but also services that recognise ethnic, cultural and religious diversity. The importance of family support and preventive services has been well documented. Ghate and Hazel found that compared to white parents, minority ethnic parents report fewer than average support networks.

VULNERABLE YOUNG PEOPLE

National data is now available to highlight overall ethnic trends in a number of areas (although the data has limitations – the ethnic background of 10% of children in need remains unclassified, for example). In March 2003, there were 388,200 children in need known to local authorities in England; almost a fifth (18%) came from a minority ethnic background (including asylum seekers). This means the overall incidence of children in need in the category of ‘ethnicity other than white’ is between 1.2 and 1.7 times the national average for the under-18 population as a whole. Children of a mixed ethnic background are most likely to be in need because of ‘abuse or neglect’, while Asian children are most likely to be in need because of ‘child’s disability’.

In a climate of cultural relativity, coupled with professional uncertainty about what constitutes child abuse, there have been long-standing concerns about the disproportionate number of minority ethnic families involved with child protection services. In 2004, there were 26,300 children on child protection registers in England; 82% were of a white background, 6% of a mixed background, 5% black or black British, and 3% Asian or Asian British (2% were ‘other’ or unborn).

Compared to the general child population, these figures suggest an over-representation of African/Caribbean and mixed-parentage children, and an under-representation of Asians. They also confirm previous research studies that have documented ethnic differences and that have identified some key factors associated with working with minority ethnic families: cultural relativity, the role of the social worker as advocate in multidisciplinary working, an understanding of overt and covert racism, and culture and language issues when engaging with families.

SPECIAL NEEDS AND DISABILITY

National DfES statistics show that Asian families and children are considerably more likely to require disability support services, and they appear to receive atypical lower-cost services. Over a fifth of the Asian children are considered to be in need due to reasons of disability compared with 13% of whites, 9% of Caribbeans, and 7% of those of mixed parentage.

Given the reported poverty among Asian families of disabled children, it is a particular concern that their needs are not being met adequately. Asian families are less likely to be in receipt of support services and have limited knowledge of direct payment assistance. Recent research highlights an urgent need for family support and also refutes common myths, such as Asian families being unwilling to receive services such as respite care, or being able to rely on supportive extended family networks. Other studies found that language difficulties, and a lack of awareness of specialist services, have resulted in a low take-up of services among Asian communities. Recent studies suggest families would welcome having one named key worker who could consistently provide information about the

nature and type of emotional, practical (adapted facilities, childcare drop-in centres) and financial (direct payments) services, within a cultural-competence framework.

LOOKED AFTER CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE

In 2004, there were 61,100 children looked after in England. In line with previous research evidence, children of mixed parentage (8%) and black children (8%) remain over-represented in the care system.

While there is ongoing concern about the low levels of support services to minority families to prevent family breakdown and the admission of children and young people into the care system, there is also a worry that children's needs are inadequately met once they are in care. Key issues around health, disability, racial harassment, the importance of maintaining family languages, religion and spirituality, and racial and ethnic identity have been usefully summarised in the Assessment Framework; it is vital that social work professionals address these. As corporate parents, local authorities must ensure that minority ethnic children are adequately provided for within a holistic framework to address all their needs, together with dual-socialisation experiences so that they grow up as confident individuals with a positive racial and ethnic identity.

Minority ethnic children are more likely than white children to have long-term foster care, rather than adoption, specified in their care plans. The placement of minority children in families which reflect their own racial and cultural background, and which are suitable to meet their overall needs, is of crucial importance. Some minority ethnic children continue to be placed in families that are racially and culturally incongruous. Support for these substitute families is vital in providing a good experience and preventing placement breakdown. A new study of 261 care leavers in England shows that mixed-parentage young people experienced severe placement disruption compared to their minority ethnic counterparts. In rural areas, the isolation experienced by minority ethnic youngsters is exacerbated by rural social workers' lack of competence in meeting the needs of minority ethnic young people. Research evidence identifies the importance of valuing diversity and nurturing young people to address positively issues of race, culture and identity.

A lack of information concerning ethnicity in fostering and adoption services remains a concern. It is crucial that in planning to provide security and stability to minority ethnic young people in care, attention is given to the principle in the 1989 Children Act, Section 22(5)(c); and that appropriate information is collected to aid improvement in service delivery.

YOUNG PEOPLE LEAVING CARE

Few studies have endeavoured to record the particular experiences of minority ethnic care leavers. However, a conference report by minority ethnic young people who had spent a large part of their lives in the care system documented the ill effects of institutional racism. A lack of racial and cultural knowledge affected their confidence and self-esteem, compounding their leaving-care experiences. Other studies have identified transracial placements, coupled with insufficient attention to young people's racial and cultural needs, as leaving young people ill-equipped to make successful transitions to adulthood and forge positive links with their ethnic community of origin.

The latest study of 261 care leavers (45% of whom were of minority ethnic background) documents the disadvantage and discrimination they experienced in a range of settings, including education, employment and training, housing and social care. While all young people raised similar concerns about inadequate involvement in decision-making and a lack of support from social services, minority ethnic young people voiced additional concerns about their experiences of racism. Yet, an analysis of Quality Protects Management Action Plans found that only 16% identified ethnicity in relation to support for care leavers. Social care agencies must address the needs of minority ethnic care leavers and provide adequate services, such as one-to-one support and group work, to tackle issues of racial discrimination. A co-ordinated multiagency approach is required to meet post-care needs and prevent marginalisation and social exclusion.

what helps

RACE, ETHNICITY AND SERVICE PROVISION: WHAT HELPS?

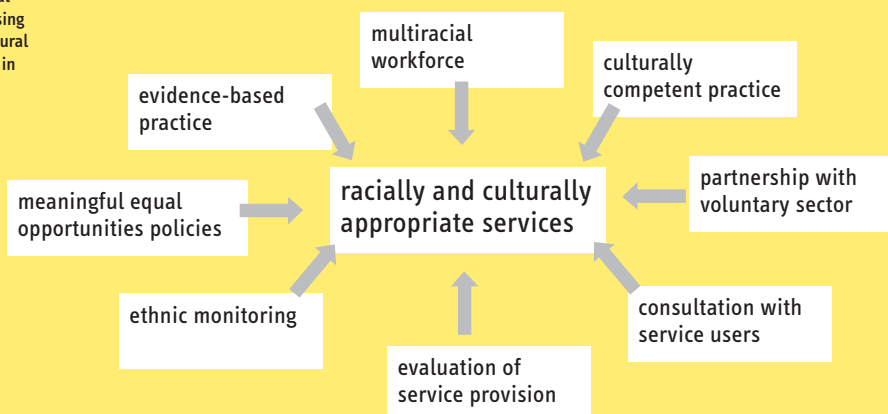
We still need to know more about what works in the area of race and ethnicity. Outcome-based research in the field remains limited, but we can draw on a range of useful practice-based texts when considering what helps. This section draws on both practice-based literature and research studies.

- **Cultural competence**

Factors that have been identified as important in making services relevant for diverse communities are highlighted in Figure 1. It is evident that a combination of approaches is needed to create infrastructures that can address issues of racial and ethnic diversity effectively. There is some research evidence to suggest that positive developments are taking place. A study involving social services departments showed that white practitioners in the Midlands were playing an important role as mediators between young Asian girls and their families. This way of working arose within a cultural-competence framework involving accumulated knowledge and experience about minority ethnic families and communities, the ability to recognise cultural similarities and differences, cultural relativism, the willingness and desire to engage with minority clients, and practitioners' own levels of self-confidence:

Many years ago I would bunch people together but I am now much more conscious of individuality, like I now understand a lot of issues around Sikhism, Buddhism and Islam and, of course, different strands of Christianity as well, including African-Caribbean and African traditions. (White social work manager)

A multifactorial model addressing racial and cultural heterogeneity in social care



what helps

In their study of 84 family centres in England and Wales, Butt and Box found that the availability of minority ethnic practitioners, together with appropriate service provision, led to user satisfaction among many minority ethnic parents. However, some services were favoured over others. Take-up was high for children's services, such as day care, out of school care, children's groups, toy libraries and educational support; services in which minority ethnic families were poorly represented included respite services, counselling and advice services, and men and women's groups (although groups specifically for minority ethnic women were more successful in attracting minority ethnic users). The high take-up of children's services reflects the needs of minority ethnic parents, but it is important to evaluate the low take-up of other much-needed services to examine how these could be tailored to meet the needs of minority ethnic families.

- **Culturally appropriate carers**

Other positive developments include increasing efforts to recruit racially and culturally appropriate substitute families for children looked after – the result of a paradigm shift in which the racial and ethnic identity needs of minority ethnic children have been accorded recognition. Such developments are far from universal, however; practice and provision has been patchy and lacking in rationale and coherence. The deployment of dedicated resources to attract minority ethnic substitute carers, comprehensive assessments of children's placement needs, appropriate racial and cultural training for all potential carers, and ongoing training and support for existing carers, are vital in the recruitment and maintenance of good placements.

The practice of kinship placements is building a strong research base. A study of kinship care found that young people and carers highlighted many advantages of such placements over local authority care. Positive outcomes included stability; maintaining links with family, siblings and friends; and sustaining and promoting racial and cultural heritage.

- **Direct work**

There is also growing recognition of the importance of emotional and therapeutic work. The establishment of appropriate institutional structures (in the form of working groups and committees) to ensure that the emotional needs of minority ethnic children are not neglected, has been shown to be effective.

There is research evidence to show that family group conferences, networking and family therapy are useful ways of working with minority families to bring about positive change. Research studies from the United States also point to a higher success rate where such methods are employed. And the Strengthening Families, Strengthening Communities (SFSC) parent education programme being run by the REU (formerly Race Equality Unit) is an excellent example of engagement with minority families leading to positive outcomes.

- **Partnership work**

The important role being played by the black voluntary sector across the country is being recognised. Examples include Kids Company in Southwark (London), which works predominantly with minority ethnic young people at risk of social exclusion; the Kashmiri and Pakistani

Professional Association, which works with young Muslim boys in Birmingham; and NAZ project in South London working with young South Asian young people in sexual health matters. Such projects need to be fully evaluated, but their approach can help other agencies understand how to engage minority ethnic users. Statutory social care agencies need to form alliances with such projects to support them in their work, and to benefit from the projects' experiences in enhancing social care services for minority ethnic families and children.

The Multi-Agency Preventative Project (MAPP) in Tower Hamlets, a Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) Innovation project, is an excellent example of a multidisciplinary venture in action. The project works with Bangladeshi adolescents who are experiencing problems such as low self-esteem, school exclusion, disruptive behaviour and low educational attainment. A co-ordinated approach involving social workers, youth workers, teachers and psychologists has proved to be effective with adolescents and their families.

In spite of the effectiveness of the black voluntary sector in ensuring use of and access to services, there are ongoing problems around 'short-termism' due to lack of funds, and the inability or unwillingness of the state sector to work in partnership to improve services for minority ethnic users. Stronger partnerships between the voluntary and statutory sectors could make a real difference.

- **Monitoring and evaluation**

Ethnic monitoring and evaluation of service provision are essential in identifying the effectiveness of service access and use. While ethnic monitoring is now a reality in the key areas of children in need, child protection and children looked after, gaps in the information on care leavers remain. Data recording also needs to be improved; the current 'unrecording' of ethnicity and language data in about a tenth of cases does not bode well for service planning and delivery. We need to be able to utilise data at a local level in meaningful ways to identify access and use from point of referral through to closure. Use and effectiveness of services need to be evaluated regularly as a matter of course and the evidence used to improve services. The nature and range of services, individual/family rights to support and provision, and the complaints procedure, all require ongoing reviews to ensure that service users are regularly updated.

CONCLUSION

Cultural competence and an understanding of the pernicious effects of institutional and individual racism are pre-requisites for beginning to meet the needs of minority ethnic children and families. In developing appropriate interventions, it is crucial that the workforce is adequately trained and skilled in meeting the needs of diverse groups. A wider dissemination of research findings in a range of areas, including health, education, employment, housing and social services – including 'grey literature' (unpublished local, regional and other reports) – is important in enhancing knowledge and skill. We must strive to develop services that address diversity and that are monitored and evaluated regularly. These efforts need to be linked with positive outcome measures, such as those now associated with the Every Child Matters agenda, if the quality of life for minority ethnic families and children is to be genuinely improved.

KEY TEXTS

RESEARCH

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This briefing has been independently and anonymously reviewed by an academic and practitioner with special interest in minority ethnic children and families. For a fully referenced version, visit the **research in practice** website:

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