Mark A Westby

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Full name Mark A Westby

Phone number

Email

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Question 37

My response to question 37, is informed by my own experiences as a coordinator in the area of children's contact and my recently submitted PhD thesis focussing on young adult perceptions of their involvement as children during parental separation. The findings of the research thesis revealed a lack of empirical measures in the area of children's involvement in decision-making. It also found that decisions to exclude children in Family Dispute Resolution (FDR) were more informed by the personal beliefs and filters of service providers, rather than systematic processes informed through empirical evidence. This has implications for Child-Focussed Practice as the best interest of children is informed by these personal beliefs, filters and experiences. Subsequently, to better inform policy and practice regarding children's participation, the thesis included the development of two quantitative measures to empirically measure young adult perceptions of their involvement in decision-making as a child, during parental separation and how their perceived involvement in decision-making related to the capacity for adversity management at age 18-24. The thesis was informed by an in-depth literature review of research in this area, including peer reviewed articles pertaining to Family Relationship Centres (FRC's) and their implementation of children's involvement during FDR. The review found that more often than not, a majority of children were excluded from sharing their views in the FDR environment, due to an overriding priority to protect children. This priority was found to influence the conceptualisation of children and is counter to the way children are conceptualised when considering their participation in decision-making. Subsequently, the overriding priority to protect children eroded practitioner confidence to include children's opinions in the process of FDR. For example, Graham, Fitzgerald and Cashmore (2015), in their study that explored the conceptualisation of children at a number of FRCs, found that most service providers perceived children as vulnerable, in need of protection and considered children lacking in capacity for decision-making. Some practitioners in the Graham et al (2015) study were even of the opinion that FDR was an adult process and not a platform to include children's views. Over a two-year period, the percentage of children excluded from the FRC process was found to be as high as 97% with only 3% of cases involving children's perspectives in the process. Other studies revealed that FRCs exclude children under the age of six from child inclusive practice. This suggests that children's inclusion in the decision-making process at FRCs is applied using an arbitrary age cut off point, rather than an individual case by case assessment. An arbitrary exclusion based on child age rather than individual assessment may be detrimental to children's long-term wellbeing as the findings from my research thesis revealed that young adults aged three to six at the time of parental separation reported being as negatively influenced by their lack of involvement in decision-making at the time of parental separation, as young adults who were aged seven to eleven. These findings suggest that the significant relationship found between low Sense of Coherence (SOC) and exclusion in the decision-making process during the time of parental separation may not be age related. A mixed methodology was utilised in the thesis that sought to reveal the relationship between perceived involvement in decision-making as a child during parental separation and the capacity to manage adversity as a young adult. Participants (n=212) were aged 18-24 years, perceived involvement as a child was measured using two qualitative measures that were rigorously developed and tested during the preliminary research phase of the PhD. The capacity for adversity management was measured using Antonovsky's (1979) Orientation to life Questionnaire (SOC-29). The findings revealed a significant positive relationship between perceived involvement as a child, and SOC as a young adult. Thematic analysis of young adult narratives of their involvement in decision-making during parental separation (n=24), revealed experiences were directly linked to specific strategies that were used by young adults to manage further adversity. Strategies developed from high involvement in decision-making as a child shared a relationship with high SOC. Conversely, strategies developed from low or no involvement in decision-making shared a relationship with low SOC. One other interesting finding from the research was found in the triangulation of qualitative and quantitative. Triangulation revealed that strategies sharing a relationship with low SOC were falsely perceived by young adults as having a positive effect on their capacity for adversity management. This finding offers insight into young adult patterns of responding to adversity and may inform why some young people repeat negative patterns of response in the management of further adversity. Finally, the take home message from the research most relevant to question 37 is that excluding children from potentially adverse environments as a strategy to manage adversity, was found to share a relationship with low capacity for adversity management in this. This has implications for strategies that rely on the withdrawal of children from potential adverse environments as a form of protection. The findings suggest that withdrawing children from the process of informing their own future may present a significant risk to long-term adversity management. Therefore, potential negative outcomes related to children's exclusion in the decision-making process should be a major consideration when making decisions not to engage children in the FDR process.

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Other comments?

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