

Self-study notes

Unit No. 3 Corporate Parenting

Unit objectives

- To identify the meaning of the concept of 'corporate parent', the responsibilities implied by the term and the legislative framework.
- To understand the corporate parent's responsibilities in relation to their own professional role.
- To be aware of the responsibilities of professionals in partner agencies who are part of the wider corporate family.

Outline of Unit

- Introduction: definitions
- The fragmentary nature of the parenting relationship
- Interpreting the corporate parent's responsibilities
- The concept of the 'corporate family', i.e. the responsibilities of public bodies and the wider community planning partnership

Introduction

Corporate parenting has been an explicit feature of policy and guidance in Scotland for the past decade. Through Part 9 of the Children and Young People (Scotland) Act 2014, the concept of corporate parenting has been enshrined in law, meaning that a total of 24 public bodies now have legal duties and responsibilities to looked after children and care leavers. These public bodies include local authorities, health boards, all colleges and universities, the police, the prison service, children's hearings, and many more.

The statutory guidance accompanying Part 9 of the Act defines corporate parenting as

...an organisation's performance of actions necessary to uphold the rights and secure the wellbeing of a looked after child or care leaver, and through which physical, emotional, spiritual, social and educational development is promoted, from infancy through to adulthood... (p4)

The guidance goes on to clarify that

...corporate parenting is about certain organisations listening to the needs, fears and wishes of children and young people, and being proactive and determined in their collective efforts to meet them. It is a role which should complement and support the actions of parents, families and carers, working with these key adults to deliver positive change for vulnerable children. (p4)

The Act and accompanying guidance build on the previous 2007 definition from the then Scottish Executive, that corporate parenting is

...the formal and local partnerships needed between all local authority departments and services, and associated agencies, who are responsible for working together to meet the needs of looked after children and young people

When a child becomes looked after, some or all of the responsibilities normally undertaken by parents become the responsibility of the state. Corporate parenting is about public funded bodies listening to children and families, and working together to meet these responsibilities. This is no longer simply the sole responsibility of the local authority,

Each corporate parent named in the Act has a different role and function, and how they act as a corporate parent will be governed to some extent by their purpose as an organisation. This being said, all corporate parents share the same duties and responsibilities to looked after children and care leavers, particularly in terms of being alert to matters which may affect these children's wellbeing, assessing their wellbeing needs, promoting their interests, providing opportunities for them to participate in activities designed to improve their wellbeing, ensuring these opportunities are accessible to all looked after children and care leavers, improving how they fulfil their corporate parenting function, and collaborating with one another.

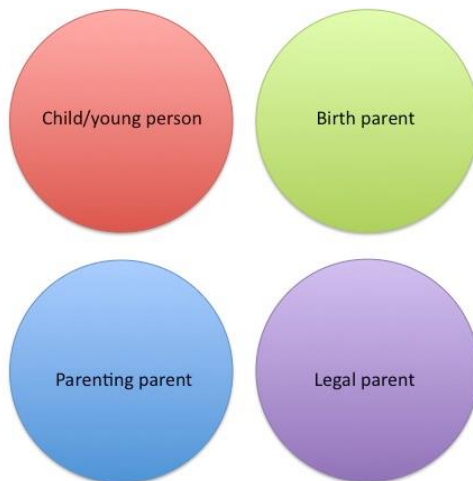
In summary, being a good corporate parent means going the extra mile for looked after children and care leavers, as if they were our own children.

The fragmentary nature of the parenting relationship

The experience of having professionals intervening in the parenting relationship, of leaving the birth family for a care placement, or of moving care placements is inevitably distressing for a child. Also, there may have been a long period, perhaps lasting years, of disruption, neglect and even trauma, prior to becoming looking after. The following activity is designed to help you to appreciate the typically fragmented nature of child-adult relationships and the confusion that this may cause for a young person involved with so many adults.

Activity

Imagine the following scenario. There are four definable yet overlapping entities: the child/young person; birth parent; parenting parent and legal parent.

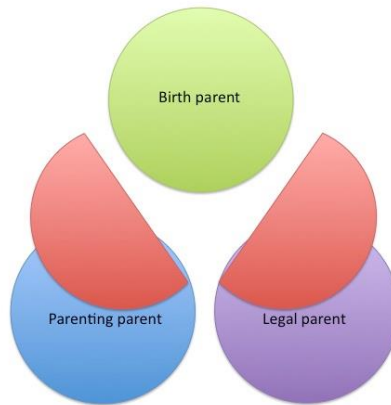


The circles represent different aspects of the task of parenting. Birth parents give a child life, a family history, the potential for skills and talents, and their health status. The parenting parent(s) fulfils all those activities associated with bringing up a child. These include: providing for a child's basic needs; planning for the future; being a resource to turn to, providing positive experiences and helping to realise hopes and dreams; and acting as teacher, advocate and mentor. The legal parenting function consists of taking decisions (or helping an older child to make decisions) in relation to education, health and medical treatment, where the child lives, etc.

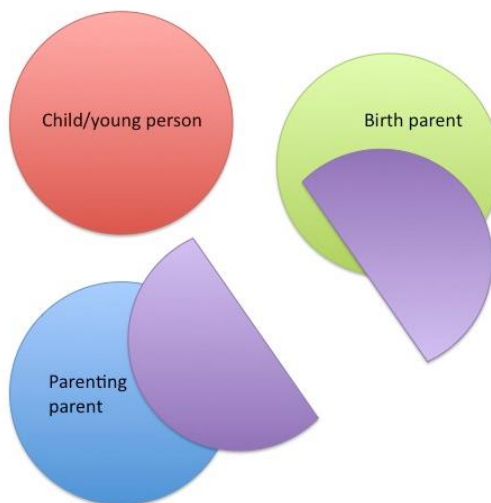
For most children the different entities overlap completely so they are living with people who share a history and have day to day caring and legal responsibilities.



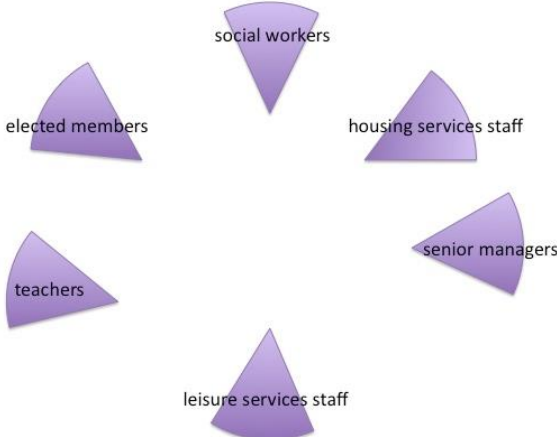
However, often a child lives with one parent, but another separated parent also maintains legal responsibility and perhaps shares aspects of day to day care. Birth parents only lose all legal rights for a child when he or she is adopted.



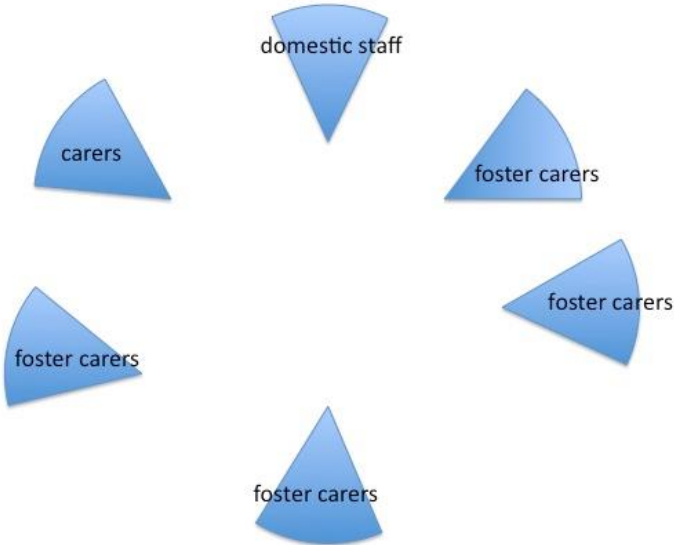
In the case of a looked after child, the reality of parenting can be very complex, often resulting in confusion for schools, youth organisations and others who play important parts in the child's life. The child may experience embarrassment and even hurt. They may feel isolated and different to their peers. Day to day caring may be undertaken by relative carers, foster carers or residential workers but the legal responsibility is shared between the parents and the local authority.



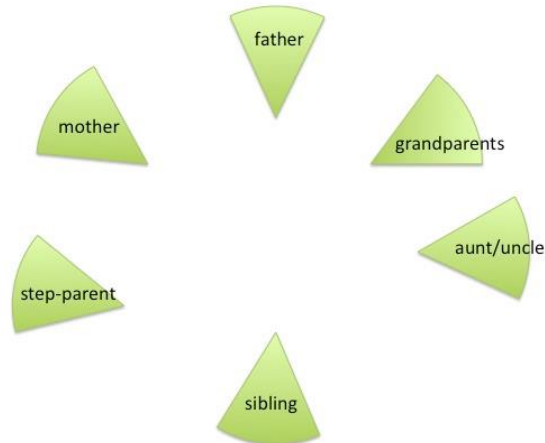
Where the local authority is effectively the legal parent, parental responsibilities are shared among a large number of people, e.g. elected members, social workers, teachers, housing services staff, leisure services staff, senior managers, and so on.



The parenting parent responsibilities are similarly shared, for example by carers and domestic staff working shifts in a residential unit, or a series of foster carers.



The birth parent responsibilities may also be shared by different people, such as mother, father, grandparents, aunt/uncle, sibling, step-parent.



The frequency with which a child's 'family' can change is a particular feature of being looked after. Even though some of these changes happen with good intentions (e.g. a move from one care placement to another that will meet the child's needs better), they may not always be planned and the disruption involved can be a bewildering experience. A child may feel powerless and frustrated and could appear angry and uncooperative. Feelings of powerlessness may also be experienced by birth parents and carers. It is important that children have real opportunities to express their feelings and to feel that their views are taken into account. Professionals should collaborate effectively to provide appropriate support.

Meetings to review a child's plan and children's hearings may result in decisions which are disappointing (e.g. where a child hoped to return to the family but instead will remain in a care placement or move to another). The periods of anticipation of the meeting and following a disappointing outcome will be stressful for a looked after child and the internal turmoil may be externalised as difficult or even violent behaviour. Carers and teachers need to be given appropriate information and also advice about supporting the child.

The following extract from an article by Randy Lee Comfort, a social worker and educational psychologist, makes this point very well.

Many children who have been removed from their birth homes are hyper-vigilant. They have trouble concentrating on what the teacher is trying to teach but are acutely aware of what everyone else in the classroom is doing. Slamming doors, particular smells, noises and lighting may trigger violent or fearful behaviour because of past associations. When a child misbehaves 'for no reason' it may be for a reason that felt very real to the child, even if he or she cannot identify or explain it. Children who have defied and survived severely injured childhoods tenaciously hold on to the behaviours and attitudes that served them well in a former time, even when they are counterproductive in their current situation. When teachers or caring adult are aware of this they are less apt to be taken off guard and to respond insensitively to unpredictable behaviour (p.32).

Interpreting the corporate parent's responsibilities

The Scottish Government provided a guide to good corporate parenting, 'These are our Bairns: a guide for community planning partnerships on being a good corporate parent'. This was produced in 2008, before the changes in the law, so does not refer to the 24 public bodies who have specific duties and responsibilities. It does however have relevant and useful guidance on how practitioners from different professions can act as good corporate parents. The statutory guidance for corporate parents relating to the new act is more general in nature, and as such does not provide detail for different staff within specific roles in the way 'These are our bairns' does.

Download the guide now and read the 'Introduction'. The activity which follows will help you to interpret particular responsibilities relevant to your role with looked after children.

Activity

First, go to the section of the guide which is most relevant to your role and read the section through. Next, download the Corporate Parenting responsibilities grid. Complete each row of the template so you have a set of bullet points under the headings: 'You will want to...' and 'How will I know I've made a difference?' Begin with what you do now, or feel that you do well.

Next, add things you feel you ought to do now but don't, or could do better. Then note actions required on your part or by others. Finally, reflect on (or discuss with colleagues) what it will take to implement the aspects of the role identified in the third row and note actions you plan to take in the fourth row. This is an opportunity to behave corporately but think like a parent.

References

- Comfort, R. L. (2007). For the love of learning: Promoting educational achievement for looked after and adopted children. *Adoption & Fostering*, 31 (1), 28-34.
- Fahlberg, V. (1994). *A child's journey through placement*. London: BAAF.